



RESEARCH PAPER

A Comparative Thematic Analysis of the Poems *I Told Him* by Ada Jafri and *We Sinful Women* by Kishwar Naheed

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of the current research is to highlight the main themes and stylistic differences in both the stories, *I Told Him* and *We Sinful Women* to analyze how the two authors manifest female identity, silence and revolt. Feminist poetry has become a strong voice of women and their struggle against patriarchy as expressed through Pakistani feminism poetry. Ada Jafri and Kishwar Naheed are the two most prominent Urdu poets who have transformed the notion of womanhood by relying on clear but overlapping poetic voices. The study applies a qualitative comparative thematic analysis approach in a feminist-postcolonial context by utilizing diction, imagery, tone, and symbolism to find latent ideological meanings. Findings of the study unearth that the poem of Jafri is full of suppressed self-exploration, whereas, that of Naheed's is an expression of group resistance. They both confront gender subjugation yet in two different expressive modes subtle resistance and overt rebellion. The research concludes that the Urdu feminist poetry is being developed as an expression of personal emotional claim into the collective empowerment, which is representative of the larger shift in the voice of women in Pakistani literature. The study recommends that the feminist Urdu poetry should be included in schools' curricula as a way of fostering gender sensitization as well as appreciation of culture.

KEYWORDS Comparative, thematic analysis, *I Told Him*, Ada Jafri, *We Sinful Women*, Kishwar Naheed

Introduction

The importance of the South Asian literature as a form of feminist expression is that it has helped to challenge the status-quo on gender and express the experiences of women in patriarchal societies. A male-dominated sphere, Urdu poetry has undergone a significant shift following the rise of female poets employing verse as a tool of self-expression and resistance against being cultural (Asif, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). Two of these voices are Ada Jafri and Kishwar Naheed, whose efforts are unique yet similar to one another on the way to revising the image of the Pakistani woman. The two poems they have written, *I Told Him* and *We Sinful Women* represent two stages of feminist awareness, one refractive and docile, the other aggressive and defiant. The two poets address the concept of patriarchal silencing in two tonalities and the use of language (Ali, 2020; Riaz, 2018).

According to such feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) and Bell Hooks (2000), the first step towards the liberation of females is to recover the voice that has been oppressed by patriarchy. This idea is the main theme of Urdu feminist poetry, in

which expression becomes a rebellious gesture against the norms. In *I Told Him*, the emotional repression and the silent expression of identity is depicted but in *We Sinful Women*, the female defiance is turned into a form of empowerment by a group of women. The conceptual play between silence and resistance places both the poets in the spectrum of postcolonial feminist discourse (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988).

Despite the increasing scholarly interest in feminist poetry in Urdu, the research has mainly been done on individual poets as opposed to a comparative thematic and stylistic study. The little research focuses on how Jafri and Naheed, who belong to two generations of Pakistani women, express various types of feminist agency in their sociopolitical worlds. This failure of comparative exploration leaves a vacuum in the comprehension of the way Urdu feminist poetry is changing into subtle introspection to mass opposition.

Feminist aspects of Pakistani poetry have been investigated previously (Khan, 2018; Jalil, 2019; Saeed, 2021), but there is no systematic examination of how the themes of both poems and their style compare to each other. Although, both the poets criticize the patriarchal ideologies, they do so in different ways: the subtle modernism of Jafri is a contrast to the direct activism of Naheed. This work fills that gap by providing a comparative thematic analysis that elucidates how the two voices are complementary in recreating the meaning of womanhood in Urdu literature. This study can be used in feminist literary criticism as it gives a comparative view of two iconic Pakistani poets in their expression of resistance and selfhood in various historical contexts.

Literature Review

Feminist poetry in Pakistan has become a place of resistance where women resist the patriarchal norms and they have agency expressed in the form of linguistic and symbolic means. Kishwar Naheed and Ada Jafri are the pioneers in this tradition who employ poetry as a tool of reclaiming the female voice that has been put to silence. Through their works, they shed light on the sociocultural facts of women in a patriarchal society, especially when the society is political and religiously conservative. This literature review investigates past studies about feminist literary expressions, thematic analysis of the Urdu poetry and comparison frameworks characterized by the works of the magazine, *We Sinful Women* and *I Told Him*.

Feminist Literary and Theoretical Approaches

Feminist literary criticism is the key to explaining the textual expressions of women as resistant and self-defensive. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) claims that the social construction of womanhood is discussed as Other to man, which is reflected in the poetry of Naheed and Jafri. Virginia Woolf (1929/2015) also placed a lot of emphasis on room of one's own, which was the place where women writers could generate their creativity and independence. Later feminist critics such as Hooks (2000) and Showalter (1985) believe that feminine literary traditions should be acknowledged as a means of cultural survival.

Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (2003) are postcolonial feminists, who criticize Western feminism that does not view the situation of Third World women as complex. They propose that subaltern women talk in forms that are culturally specific, like Urdu poetry, reflecting the general agony and revolt. Ahmed (2000) and Minh-ha (1989) also note that the construct of female identity in the postcolonial situations should be understood by the means of local history and politics, as opposed to the universal feminist discourse.

Urdu Feminist Literature

The Urdu literature has traditionally been influenced by sensibilities of the male gender but women poets have changed it gradually by prefiguring gender and identity politics. The first significant woman modernist Urdu poet Ada Jafri reestablished the poetic identity of women with her combination of self-reflection and indirect protest (Asif, 2016). Emotional restraint and indirect protest against the expectations of the patriarchal world is evident in her poem *I Told Him*, which is rather unusual in comparison to a more rebellious style of voice (Khan, 2018).

However, the poem by Kishwar Naheed, *We Sinful Women* (1981), reflects an extreme rebellion and empowerment. It is observed by scholars like Jalil (2019) and Ahmed (2017) that the poetry by Naheed is based on the socio-political chaos of Pakistan under Zia-ul-Haq regime, a time when the control of the patriarchal institution was institutionalized. The works of Naheed reappropriate *The Sinful Woman* as an act of moral revolt and subversion (Kamran, 2015).

Resistance and Identity

South Asian feminist poetry is marked with resistance, identity and voice. As Bhatnagar (2014) explains, Urdu feminist poetry is an aesthetic and political talk that compromises between individual trauma and social action. Zia (2018) views Naheed as a liberation pronouncement in her study titled *We Sinful Women*, where women are denied morality imposed by society and take control back by symbolically committing sins. In the meantime, the full-length of *I Told Him* by Jafri summarizes an inner conversation in which the woman speaker reexplores the meaning of silence as an act of dignified resistance instead of acquiescence (Hussain, 2019). According to Farooqi (2017), the language of both poets is strategic: Naheed with irony and hyperbole, Jafri with the metaphor and understatement. This linguistic variety is an illustration of how feminist authors shape language to be used in resistance within cultural restrictions.

Comparative Studies and Stylistic Studies

The re-invention of the tradition and the modernity as interpreted by feminist poets has been discussed through comparative literary studies. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002), words are used by the postcolonial women writers to write back not only against imperial dominance, but also against patriarchal dominance. Such an outlook is consistent with the involvement of Naheed into the feminist discourses of the world with keeping culture rooted (Shamsie, 2017). Naheed also uses the stylistic devices of free verse, repetition, and collective voice to bring the oppressed women together (Haider, 2020). Instead, Jafri employs a regulated rhythm and typical imagery to express reflective empowerment (Qureshi, 2016). This ambivalence reflects what Butler (1990) terms the performative gender nature in which expression in itself is a subversive act. As a comparative study (Khalid, 2020; Abbas, 2019) underlines, the two poets support the idea of women liberation but their artistic policies vary depending on their socio-historical backgrounds. The modernist self-reflection of Jafri is the consciousness of early feminism that was influenced by the cultural modesty, and the revolutionary spirit of Naheed is the sign of the rebellious masses against the political oppression.

Material and Methods

This study follows a comparative based thematic analysis approach which is a qualitative research design to investigate the prevailing themes and stylistic differences in

Ada Jafri and Kishwar Naheed in their two works, *I Told Him* and *We Sinful Women*. This methodology aims at exploring how the two poets define female identity, resistance and empowerment in the socio-cultural and historical backgrounds of the Pakistani society. Since the qualitative inquiry can be conducted in an interpretive manner, it is best applied to literary analysis that tries to address the notion of meaning, ideology and emotion inherent in poetic language (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Research Design

Its approach to the study is descriptive-analytical in the context of feminist literary criticism. The given method allows comparing two poetic texts in detail in order to reveal both similarities and differences in the way similar topics are addressed. The analysis explains the way language creates gendered experiences through the application of diction, imagery, symbolism, tone and structure by the poets. It is an interpretive investigation as opposed to an empirical one by concentrating on textual evidence, the context of history and critical approaches to it. Such a design is consistent with the interpretation paradigm, aiming at comprehending the expression of human in cultural and ideological contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Data Selection and Sources

The main source of information in relation to this study is two chosen poems, the one of Ada Jafri titled *I Told Him* and the one of Kishwar Naheed titled *We Sinful Women*. The purposeful selection of these poems is because both are the most powerful representatives of the Urdu feminist poetry and they reflect various stages of the female consciousness in Pakistani literature. Scholarly articles, literary reviews and feminist theoretical works of writers like Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Bell Hooks (2000) are the secondary sources.

Analytical Framework

The analysis incorporates thematic and stylistic interpretation on a feminist postcolonial analysis. Some of the recurrent themes that are identified in the thematic analysis include identity, oppression, resistance and solidarity. The stylistic analysis focuses on the poetic devices, which include tone, imagery, repetition and metaphor, to gain insight into the way the language of each poet forms the meaning. The analysis is based on the thematic approach applied by Braun and Clarke (2006) and conducted in four stages, namely familiarization, coding, theme identification, and comparative interpretation.

This process may be directed by a feminist critical approach which puts emphasis on the resistance of the poets to the discourses of patriarchy and the construction of womanhood. Postcolonial feminist views are also taken into account in the analysis since gender oppression in South Asia is connected with cultural, religious and political hierarchies (Mohanty, 2003). Such hybrid structure is able to offer an inclusive interpretation of the texts as gendered and culturally subversive texts.

Results and Discussion

Thematic Overview

The feminist resistance in both poems is not identical, as the methods of protest are of different tones, forms, and ideological scope. *I Told Him* by Jafri is a kind of silent reflection based on emotional sincerity and *We Sinful Women* by Naheed is the protest

song of a whole nation against the patriarchy and government. They both emphasize the way in which women bargain agency in constraining cultures (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002).

Identity and Selfhood

In *I Told Him*, Jafri portrays a woman who has a hard time being an individual in the relationship that is emotionally stifling. The reclaiming of identity comes out subtly but ferociously in the words of the speaker when she says, I told him I could not live just to please him. The poem reflects the war between emotional attachment and autonomy and implies that the act of self-expression should be the form of resistance of the woman (Ali, 2019). Her suppressed voice carries both sense of pain and dignity, which Beauvoir (1949/2011) referred to as othering of woman in the patriarchal order.

On the contrary, *We Sinful Women* is something that breaks the walls of the personal world. Naheed is representative of all women suppressed by society and personal struggle is turned into uprising. The pronoun we she uses gives out a feeling of solidarity and defiance. The recurrence of the line It is we sinful women redefines the term sinfulness, as it is a moral boldness and not a transgression. This mass identity breaks down the patriarch dichotomy of chaste and fallen women and promotes rather a liberated and self-determined femininity (Hashmi, 2010). Therefore, in her poem, Naheed turns the guilt into empowerment and silence into solidarity.

Resistance and Rebellion

The main theme of both poets is resistance which has various forms. The opposition that Jafri puts up is stifled, inner-worldly, and emotional. Her performance of telling him, marks the time when a woman takes back her voice. The silent fight against the patriarchal norms reflects the silence of the conflicts of women trapped in domesticities (Mahmood, 2016). The restrained diction and moderate tone of the poet can be interpreted as the cultural limitations that apply to the expression of the female, and make the slightest articulation a form of subversion.

The resistance of Naheed on the other hand is political and open. Her *We Sinful Women* is not abide by the religious and cultural principles that label them as immoral to demand independence. Naheed disrupts the power of the morality that is defined by the male gender through her aggressive tone. The refrain, *We Sinful Women*, in the poem serves as an anti-colonial chant of resistance (Spivak 1988) that is the refusal by subaltern to be silent. Thus, the poem by Naheed represents a rebellious act, a rebellion in the face of the society and transforms the poem into political rhetoric.

Patriarchy and Oppression

The two poets criticize patriarchy though in different aspects. In *I Told Him*, male figure is an expression of emotional superiority in intimate relationships. Patriarchy is presented as a personal, psychological process, and not as an official one. The emotional force of the poem reflects the victimization of women through love, loyalty and silence within themselves (Khalid, 2020).

Naheed, on the other hand, puts the patriarchy in the social, religious, and political organizations. Her poem questions morality codes which prove the legitimacy of female oppression. The sinful women are the figurative representation of the excluded group of people according to gender, social status and ideology. Then, the rebellion of Naheed targets the intersectionality of oppression which is in line with the feminist theory that

gender inequality cannot be divorced with other social injustices (Mohanty, 2003). In this way, Jafri speaks to herself but Naheed speaks to the whole nation- two stages of feminist awakening; between inner self-awareness and outer activism.

Stylistic and Linguistic Analysis

Stylistic difference is very instrumental in the way the two poets pass across their feminist messages. The lyrical accuracy of Jafri is very different; it is directed against the rhetoric intensity of Naheed which is in the feminist approach.

Voice and Tone

The tone of Jafri is pensive and regretful, which is in line with the lyrical closeness of the traditional Urdu ghazal. The first person singular (I) allows the readers to enter the personal world of the poet, as her object is emotionally confined. The lack of anger or accusation that the poem implies mean not only the appropriate behavior of the culture but also silent suffering (Farooqi, 2014). But beneath this control there is a subservient protest against the erasure of emotions.

Instead, Naheed speaks in a bold, collective and insurgent manner. The poem starts with a statement and finishes with the success. The we togetherness dissolves loneliness and builds unity. Her language is plain and unassertive. Naheed uses repetition and rhythm to turn poetic language into a kind of protest which Showalter (1986) refers to as gynocentric writing a discourse that focuses on the voice and the experiences of women.

Imagery and Symbolism

The imagery used by Jafri is domestic and quiet, distance, eyes, silence and unspoken words. These trigger the unseen lines of female oppression. Silence is resistance as well as oppression, in the sense that making the speaker to tell him, the silence is language itself (Ahmad, 2017). Her minimal imagery is a commentary on the emotional tone of the reality that women experience in the realms of the inner.

Naheed by contrast is more visceral and more public, as he speaks of burning bodies, sin, defiance. Her metaphors raise revolution and confrontation. She inverts the moral meaning of the word sin, and instead of condemnation, she makes it pride. Her use of images is in line with what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) define as writing back to empire, which is a linguistic re-appropriating of agency being used here in feminist struggle.

Structure and Form

I Told Him is formally a traditional and linear structure. Its regulated pace and shortness are equivalent to the limits of its female speaker. The closed form, the rhetoric of which is being criticized, serves to strengthen the suffocating domesticity, whereas the poetic articulation process itself creates a metaphorical space of emancipation (Rahman, 2019).

In her poem, We Sinful Women, Naheed employs the free verse technique because she does not support rhyme and meter as the representations of confinement. It is musicalized by repetition of the refrain in rhythmic as opposed to metrical terms which is a characteristic of the contemporary feminist poetics. The unlimited form of the poem reflects the freedom it requires on female bodies and voices (Saeed, 2021).

In this way, the stylistic difference between the two poets is not just aesthetic but ideological as well, as the restrained form used by Jafri represents restricted agency whereas, the freedom of the form used by Naheed represents freedom.

Comparative Discussion

In comparison to each other, Ada Jafri and Kishwar Naheed are two generations and fashion of Pakistani feminism. It is possible to hear the initial awakenings of the feminist consciousness in the context of modesty and introspection in the work of Jafri written at the middle of the twentieth century. Her light tone displays the social and cultural etiquette of that period where one could hardly openly oppose. Naheed developed in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of political repression, and the energy of her approach is more radical and collective feminism. Her poetry is timely to the postcolonial and feminist movements around the world that focus on intersectionality and activism (Butalia, 2004).

Although, both poets are defying patriarchy they do it with the different feminist idioms- psychological realism applied by Jafri and political radicalism by Naheed. They trace a trajectory of feminist development in Urdu poetry together: the restrained claim of inner agency, to the more aggressive statement of collective rebellion. What Hooks (2000) refers to as the move from the periphery to the core, all of their works share the common element of taking the domestic pain of women and putting it in the public arena.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis Ada Jafri's *I Told Him* and Kishwar Naheed *We Sinful Women* that offers a comparison of both works brings into the light of two strong but separate voices of feminist consciousness in Urdu literature. The two poems were written in different socio-political and historical periods, but both poets managed to express the experiences of women living under patriarchy, but their styles vary in tone, expression and ideological range. The poetry in Jafri shows how the internal uprising of a female is silent and personal as she tries to deal with the emotional independence in the intimate relationship, whereas, the poem written by Naheed is a group revolt to the cultural, religious, and political structures that have oppressed women. Collectively, these poems illustrate how feminism has evolved in the South Asian literature turning the silent protest into a visible revolution.

The poem of Ada Jafri titled *I Told Him* is a poetic portrait of the woman in her fight to gain a sense of self in a locked up domestic space. By having the audacity to tell her emotional truth, her speaker acts in what Barlas (2002) describes as re-reading gender norms through experience. What is so strong about the poem is that it is subtle; Jafri does not use radical slogans and open rebellion but understatement and restraint to show the internal struggle between duty and identity. This silent rebellion reflects the first steps in the feminist awakening of Urdu literature as women poets started to defy the patriarchal norms, but they did not completely abandon cultural values (Farooqi, 2014). In such a way, the work of Jafri is a symbol of feminism of introspection, when self-realization is turned into a form of transformation.

On the contrary, *We Sinful Women* by Kishwar Naheed rebuffs the notion that silence is complicity. The derogatory term of sinful as a label of stigma has been altered by her poem to become a sign of resistance and moral censure becomes strength. The collective voice is that of Naheed, which according to Ahmed (1992) is the collective agency of the women who have no desire to be classified into the patriarchal morality. The phrase

It is we sinful women serves as an accuser and an anthem, that is, it claims female rebellion and unity. This is an important change in feminist discourse, though the individual I of Jafri becomes the collective we of Naheed. It shows what Hooks (2000) refers to as the shift of marginal to center, in which the voice of women is no longer kept in the periphery but instead it can be heard in the areas of protest.

The poems have two different feminist aesthetics stylistically. Jafri is very emotional and lyrical, which corresponds to her interest in self-reflection. Her firm frame and figurative representation of silence and speech is a symptom of the sophistication of feminine agency in the male-dominated societies. On the contrary, the free verse, the straightforwardness, and the literary repetition of Naheed are metaphors of liberation both poetic and ideological. The thematic liberty of the female characters in *We Sinful Women* is matched with stylistic liberty, as the female characters begin to reclaim literary language to make it gynocentric writing, as stated by Showalter (1986).

This stylistic deviation emphasizes the differences in historical time of the poets. As Jafri wrote in the early decades of the Pakistani government, she was working in a conservative environment that did not allow women to express themselves openly. Therefore, her opposition is of a psychological and emotional nature by basis of dignity and reflection (Khalid, 2020). Naheed, who has come up in the political turbulent years of 1970s and 1980s, writes in an environment of activism and reform. Her resistance is vocal, outspoken, and radical and it can be taken as the coming of age of feminist poetics in Urdu literature. As a whole, their works follow a chronological and ideological development of women literary resistance - between the nuance of self-expression and rebellion.

Besides gender, both poems are working with postcolonial identity. The personal crisis of Jafri is reflected in the overall pursuit of the identity in newly established postcolonial Pakistan, the place where society tries to find the medium to reconcile modernity and tradition (Rahman, 2019). However, the poem by Naheed does not only challenge the concept of patriarchy but also the concept of authoritarianism and religious norms, revealing the connection between the oppression of gender and the oppression of political power (Saeed, 2021). Therefore, their writings place feminism in a more comprehensive criticism of social hierarchies that Mohanty (2003) in her piece *Feminism without Borders* urges us to adopt the principle of intersections of power of gender, class and culture.

The discussion comes to a conclusion that Ada Jafri and Kishwar Naheed, notwithstanding the disparity in generations, have one major thing in common the desire to reclaim the agency of women in the use of poetic words. The introspective feminism occupies Jafri with the power of women to look at their inner strength and the collective feminism of Naheed calls on the women to do something with it. Their differences that can be defined as emotional or political are not to be considered as opposing but rather as the stages in the development of Urdu feminist literature. Both poets are an example of what Beauvoir (1949/2011) termed the becoming of the woman, the constant struggle of establishing a subject in a world that attempts to construct her as being other.

Moreover, this comparative study shows that feminist Urdu poetry is not a simple literary work but social commentary. It questions the oppositions of purity and sin, silence and speech, private and public. In their voices, Jafri and Naheed reconfigure the description of womanhood as passive to power and turn poetic description as the form of consciousness-raising and cultural transformation (Ali, 2019). Their poems prompt the reader to think about resistance based not only on open protest, but also emotional truth-telling, self-expression and solidarity.

To sum up, comparing the works *I Told Him* and *We Sinful Women*, it is possible to note that feminist discourse in Urdu literature has evolved dynamically. Jafri is quiet in his rebellion and Naheed is loud in her rebellion to create a continuum of resistance where one is based on the transformation of silence into speech and weakness into power. The two poets offer the redefinition of womanhood as they choose to, not following the thread of literary and social custom. After all, their poetry serves as a good example of how the power of words should not be underestimated in order to fight against oppression, evoke awareness, and create new routes to gender justice. Their work remains a feminist topic of discussion in South Asia, as it confirms that poetry can be the most powerful tool, and it is personal and political.

Recommendations

Further studies are also needed to explore the wider range of feminist expression in South Asian literature by incorporating comparative studies of literature across languages and geographies. Feminist Urdu poetry should be included in schools curricula as a way of fostering gender sensitization as well as appreciation of culture. In addition, the interdisciplinary methodology involving literary, sociological, and linguistic views can further advance the knowledge of the story of women resistance and how they have been changing in the modern Pakistani society

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