



RESEARCH PAPER

Constructing Womanhood: A Critical Analysis of Female Identity in Pakistani Short Stories

¹Aneesa Kalsoom, ²Maryam Munir and ³Marwa Qaisar

1. Lecturer, Department of English) Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), Mirpur, AJK, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English) Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), Mirpur, AJK, Pakistan
3. BS-English Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), Mirpur, AJK, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author** | aneesa.eng@must.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Men are the subjects and women often the objects of patriarchal societies. To explore this construction and representation of 'other' being associated with the female, the present study analyses a group of short stories by Pakistani writers through the ideas of Beauvoir presented in her work 'The Second Sex'(1949). Binaries are represented and usually reinforced through literature where women are subject to discriminatory treatment at home or in a professional setting. Pakistani literature also reflects such instances where women are positioned as subservient. These dynamics are illustrated in the selected Pakistani short stories, which show how societies and culture influence women's actual experiences. Therefore, Beauvoir's (1949) idea of women as others is applied in these Pakistani stories in the context of a larger feminist conversation about identity, construction and oppression. Textual analysis and close reading are used to interpret these short stories. Through close reading, the study examines how selected texts represent women facing suppression and social exclusion. They struggle to find their individual selves within strict boundaries. They undergo oppression and accept the roles imposed by society. The present study affirms the relevance of Beauvoir's feminist ideas to the South Asian context. The finding demonstrate how Pakistani literature reflects and illustrates the limitations imposed by patriarchy on women.

Keywords: Beauvoir's, South Asian, Second Sex, Other

Introduction

Literature has long served as a powerful tool for women to discover their true identities. The fictional characters in the stories give voice to real-life issues. For this reason, the art of storytelling is often utilized as a form of resistance by feminist writers to give words to the injustice and gender discrimination in patriarchal society. (Hooks, 2015). In South Asian literature, especially in Urdu short fiction, female writers have used narrative techniques to highlight deep-rooted gender disparities that shape the lives of women. (Hashmi 2002; Jameel 2019). Their works often remain underexplored through the lens of Western feminist frameworks (Zubair & Shirazi, 2014).

The current study is grounded in Beauvoir's existentialist ideas, especially those given in her seminal work 'The Second Sex' (1949). According to Beauvoir, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". This implies that femininity is something constructed by society and its norms, not something biological. A central aspect given by Beauvoir is the concept of woman as 'other'. This concept of 'otherness' provides a lens to critically look at

the division of society where females are demarcated in relation to males. This attitude of society leads to the denial of female agency (Beauvoir, 2011).

In the contemporary world, females continue to suffer. Pakistani women are facing a number of mental and physical issues that include oppression, early marriage, and honour killings. These issues are often portrayed by Pakistani writers in their writings to challenge the constructed norms against female agency. (Subhani, 2020)

The feminist movement also led to increased criticism of gender violence and other forms of oppression based on social status. Pakistani female writers reflected the problems of the marginalized group in the male-dominated society through their work. The present study explores the work of Hajra Masroor, "The Monkey Wound", Talat Abbasi, "The Simple Question", Muneeza Shamsie, "Shehrzad", and Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah, "The Bull and the she devil". Most of their characters are shown as victims of gender discrimination, oppression, as well as. However, literature also has the potential to inspire change and progress. Addressing these issues can motivate readers to reflect upon social injustices and how they can be made equitable and inclusive for all.

Literature Review

The exact origin of the term feminism is unclear, but it is said to have originated from the French 'féminisme' (Herouach, 2019). The 1880s are associated with its emergence as a socio-political movement in France, where different activists gave it momentum through protests and demonstrations. Kuleli (2019) sees it as a movement aimed at addressing equality and rights for females in all spheres of life. It aims to overcome patriarchal structures in domestic and political matters. Feminism is an ethical, political, and social philosophy and movement that speaks for the rights of women (Tyson, 2014). Critics who support feminism studied how literature brings to attention the social, psychological, and political oppression carried out on women. According to Ferree (2006), feminism is a belief in giving all those equal rights to women that they struggle for in different spheres of life. Steans and Pettiford (2009) contend that the rise of feminism results from the efforts of human civilization to advance women's standing in society.

Bhasin (2006) declares that the subjugation and oppression of women have been a constant feature of patriarchal societies throughout history. Nayar (2010) believes that the representation of women is fragile, passive, innocent, seductive, or ridiculous; sentimental is ingrained in it and influences actual social conditions. They do not have power as men do and are treated as sex objects. Therefore, feminism is a worldview that declines to delink art from the prevailing social conditions and practices. Barry (2009) further affirms that the theory of feminism is recognized not only as a single school of political thought but also as works that express women's struggles over time.

In Pakistani English literature, women are commonly depicted as victims of cultural, institutional, and domestic violence. Mushtaq (2022) focuses on the misery of women in the context of Bina Shah's "The Wedding of Sundri". The researcher asserts that Bina Shah traces a wide range of social and cultural standards that lead to the voicelessness and subalternity of women. Sundri, a fourteen-year-old village girl, is the major victim of the story, whose life is further made worse by her voicelessness. When she was only seven years old, she was engaged to Ghulam Farid, a family friend of Sundri's father. No one asks for her consent. Her father, Mohammad Karim, decided on her wedding as he was the family's decision-maker and never let his wife say anything about their daughter's wedding. During her Nikah, Sundri is taught by her parents to remain dutiful and devoted to her husband and in-laws and to have a son. The story concludes with the murder of

Sundri. "She was declared Kari (amoral) by her villagers because, since childhood, she used to play with boys of her age, and now she is viewed as impure by her in-laws" (Mushtaq, 2022, p. 50)

Octarinanda and Susitna (2020) examine Shehraz's works (1988), in which the main characters face challenges within a patriarchal culture and survive with dignity. It reflects the strengths of Pakistani women. The analysis emphasizes the common theme of women navigating a patriarchal society. The female characters depict balancing roles with men, embodying feminine and masculine qualities, and serving as role models for other women. Therefore, Shehraz's fiction can be classified as a feminist narrative.

Siraj et al. (2011) vindicates the marginalization elements that increase women's sufferings in the novel *Our Lady of Alice* Bhatti. The researchers state that Hanif has portrayed women as passive and submissive who rely on their males for their protection. Hanif also believes that if Alice in the novel, Alice Bhatti, belonged to a Muslim community, she would still be treated the same way she is currently being treated. He emphasizes that in their society, the main issue is not differences in faith but rather the treatment of women. Hanif has also highlighted the unjust judicial system where the criminals belonging to the upper-class roam freely after committing crimes, and the victim does not get justice. Women living in such systems are exposed to various threats, violence, and discrimination. Alice and her mother encounter the same situation. Alice's mother was working as a housemaid when she was raped by the owner and then murdered by him. Later, he claimed she had just fallen from a marble staircase.

Rehman et al. (2022) scrutinize the deplorable condition of women in the novels, i.e., *The Holy Women* (2001) by Qaisra Shehraz and *The Slum Child* (2010) written by Bina Shah. The female characters in both novels go through the oppression of the double standards of a patriarchal society that subdues and pushes them toward misery. Zari Bano from *The Holy Woman* lives a suppressed life inside the house. Despite being an educated girl, she has no identity of her own, and she acts merely like a Puppet in the hands of the male members of her family. The powerlessness of women is depicted by the character of Zari Bano, who was married to a Holy Quran and became a Holy Woman only because of her father's evil demands.

Yadav (2017), studying females as depicted in Indian stories, explores the writings of Taslima Nasrin, focused on feminism and the enslavement of women. She has depicted how patriarchal society affects women's lives and their mindsets. The women in her novel *Lajja* were mistreated by their family, state, and law. According to Taslima, a woman has no desire in relation to her family. She merely needs to fulfill her obligations and disregard her wishes. One of her female characters wanted to move to her family for safety in India during the time of distress when the incident of the Babri masjid occurred, but her wish remained unfulfilled. All she did was cry silently while conforming to traditional norms. This demonstrates how women must carry out men's wishes while keeping their desires a secret.

Females in Roy's "A God of Small Things" were examined by Tandon (2022) as individuals who defy social norms and cultural taboos. Roy explored multilayers of oppression on women in Indian society, linking it to caste, class, and colonial histories. She placed the struggles of females in the broader context of justice and equality. This oppression is not only confined to the females of the subcontinent but is a widespread reality.

Beauvoir's concept of the female as 'other' offers a strong framework to analyse literary works that place women in social constructs. This unveils the structural imbalance

of societies where womanhood is defined by males (Beauvoir, 2011). Females are defined in opposition to male identity, giving them a marginalized position by confining their reach to only a few areas of life, especially to the domestic four walls. The current study aims to explore such multifaceted experiences of females in short stories by Pakistani authors.

Material and Methods

The current study is qualitative in nature. It employs Textual Analysis and close reading as a method to identify how gendered discrimination, oppression, and the role of women as 'others' are produced within the selected Pakistani short stories of Muneeza Shamsie, Hamidullah, Abbasi, and Hajra Masroor. The research reveals how the writings express women's experiences and include gender-related ideologies through meticulous interpretation of story aspects. *The Second Sex* (1949) by Beauvoir is used as a framework to analyse the representation of women as 'other' in male-dominated societies. The study explores female oppression at the hands of males and how they accept gender roles constructed by the society in which they live.

The present study employs Beauvoir's influential work *The Second Sex* (1949), which argues that patriarchal societies treat women as the "Other." Using this framework, the study explores how women experience oppression, accept gender roles, and struggle to live independently within a culturally restrictive patriarchal society. Furthermore, it examines the causes of women's oppression, such as their lack of consciousness and adherence to social norms that mainly benefit men. *The Second Sex* (1949) highlights the fact that women are socially constructed as "Other" in a male-dominated society, which is a cultural and historical phenomenon. Beauvoir (1949) argues, "One is not born a woman but rather becomes one". Feminist theory suggests that gender is not a fixed thing, as calling a child he or she is a wrong label; all are born equal human beings. The labelling of the child restricts its identity; as a result, women become instruments and puppets in the hands of men, and thus, oppression and subjugation of women rise in a society.

Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005) argue that Beauvoir has described the role of society in which males are prominent, and women are viewed as *The Second Sex*. She has denied the biological differences and shared a distrust of femininity. Moreover, Beauvoir has also explained how women are objectified in patriarchal society because of their child-bearing role or as simple sex objects. According to Beauvoir, women are oppressed because they are not financially independent. As in a patriarchal system, men are the breadwinners while women are responsible for the housekeeping.

Beauvoir explained gendered existence through two categories:

- Immanence is defined as the constrained roles assigned to women, for instance, caretaking, procreation, and sex object.
- Transcendence is defined as free will to be creative and a desire to pursue projects of choice.

Through the perspective lens of Beauvoir, this research analyzes how Pakistani short stories critique the patriarchal system and reflect the resistance and endurance of women. Thus, the feminist theory provides the conceptual tools to analyze how Pakistani fiction reflects the suffering of women and resists gender roles. In conclusion, the seminal work of Beauvoir is still relevant against the backdrop of Pakistani culture. Thus, literature serves as the medium to reimagine the role of women outside the patriarchal definition.

Results and Discussion

The selected Pakistani stories have portrayed oppressed women in a patriarchal society that perpetuates gender disparity. Pakistani feminist authors like Muneeza Shamsie, Hamidullah, Abbasi, and Hajra Masroor have given voice to the victims of men's aggression and gender disparity through their pen. They have portrayed female characters in a restricted system that confines them in rigid boundaries, while men are shown as oppressive, who objectify women. Thus, these stories depict how women are considered "Other" and stripped of their true identities. Beauvoir argues that every man claims a transcendental lifestyle. At the same time, a male-dominated society constrains a woman into immanence, which is procreation and service, thus devaluing her true potential to be a productive member of society.

Shehrzad, a short story by Muneeza Shamsie, portrays a patriarchal society rooted in South Asian culture where women are generally considered unequal to men and have no status to voice their opinions. The elements of oppression against women and gender discrimination are depicted through a character named Shehrzad, who struggles with injustice for being a woman. These prejudices begin within her family, where her mother prefers her brother, Shah Rukh, over her. Shehrzad tries her best to get her mother's affection, but her mother always treats her as an outsider, while Shah Rukh still gets love from her mother, despite being aggressive and spoiled. This shows that gender discrimination stems from family life.

Spoiled by his mother's love and care. Shah Rukh exerts pressure and supremacy over Shehrzad, treating her like a slave and silencing her voice to protest. Being a male member, *Shah Rukh protects himself from accountability and reinforces him as an oppressive person, while Shehrzad suffers the consequences of his actions* (p.24). Patriarchal society centralizes the male figure and treats women less like humans. Shamsie has portrayed the degradation of women's personality and existence by showing Shah Rukh's behavior with his sister. When Shehrzad is forced to attend the party of Malcolm Carter, nobody bothers her will.

Shamsie has also shown the mother's role in the growth of a patriarchal society. Instead of supporting Shehrzad, her mother compares her with Shah Rukh and fat-shames her. This shows that patriarchal norms are internalized and passed down to the next generation by the mother. As the text reveals: "*Shehrzad was raised by other slave women during colonial times... her mother overlooked her, dismissing her with a wave of the hand*" (p. 24).

This means that gender discrimination is both historical and personal, which combines the colonial subjugation with the patriarchal setup in private life.

The Monkey Wound

Hajra Masroor, a prolific Pakistani writer, portrays the patriarchal society in her work *The Monkey Wound*, aiming to uplift women's status. The story reflects the fragile condition of women within a social and cultural system that denies them their legal rights. While illustrating the suffering of women, she has critiqued the cultural norms that promote gender discrimination.

The suffering of a woman under a patriarchal society becomes even worse when she is ignored. In *The Monkey Wound*, the female character is likened to a *jharu*, a straw broom, to illustrate her fragility: "*Every fiber of her existence was tingling... her body was heated like a hot sun... even the fever melted her bones and made her weak like jharu.*" (p. 92)

In an oppressive society, she is viewed as nothing more than an object, burdened with domestic labor and deprivation. Women are dehumanized and stripped of their dignity. Their identities are obscured by the roles that are forced upon them, where silence, sacrifice, and service are the only ways to be valued. The underlying patriarchal norms that normalize suffering and deny women the right to comfort, autonomy, and selfhood are revealed by this reduction of a woman to a utilitarian object. The text not only portrays her physical ailment but also challenges the social structures that consistently deprive and devalue women's lives.

Masroor has also criticized that gender inequality stems from the family system, and it reinforces patriarchy in society. Presenting a nameless and faceless family in the story shows that oppression is universal, highlighting the suffering of all women in different households.

The stigma of being unmarried also haunts the protagonist, as in the patriarchal society, women are seen as caretakers and child bearers; they are often seen as a burden for their family until they get married. *"All of a sudden, the weight of still being unmarried would overwhelm him."* (p. 93)

She is constantly being compared with the other girls of her age who are married and mothers of four to five children. Masroor has described the suffering of the protagonist in a powerful way: *"She would experience what seemed like the marrow melting from her bones"* (p. 92). This line reflects her physical and mental breakdown under the patriarchal system that is consuming and destroying her soul.

Hajra Masroor criticizes the patriarchal structures in *The Monkey Wound* through vivid metaphors. For instance, *fever, monkeys, melting bones*, and a *straw broom*. She depicts women as the victims of gender disparity and a symbol of societal oppression. Domestic violence has been highlighted by Hajra Masroor as she depicted women as being considered a burden on men by society, for which they face aggression from men. She has not only highlighted the harsh realities of society but has also given voice to the sufferings of women.

The Bull and The She-Devil

This story depicts the typical conservative mindset of Punjabi men who always want to dominate. Men dominate their wives and act as if they are their possessions or animals. The main character of this story, Ghulam Qadir, also carries this mindset. He is full of jealousy and frustration towards his wife, whom he refers to as both a devil and a bull. In the beginning, Gulam is shown working in the fields, distracted by his constant yearning for his wife, which becomes the reason for him to name his wife a devil whose beauty continuously distracts him from his work. Even after fulfilling his desires, his longing persists, and he wants to claim her as his own, as if she were a possession.

His wife seems distant to him, even though her body feels familiar. The thought makes him angry that the way she talks and smiles at others is different from how she behaves with him. When his bull runs away, his wife soothes it back, but this infuriates him, as he thinks that his wife is now controlling his bull, when she should be his slave. Even his brother and nephew are bewitched by her manners. So, she is a devil who is trying to belittle him. The story reflects the man's desire to possess his wife as if she were an object, and in turn, the wife believes she is meant to be treated this way. *"To him, she was those first few weeks a body. A body and nothing more. A body, beautiful and soft"* (Hamidullah, 1971, p. 43). It implies that a woman is considered a toy to be played with, but not a person.

The rural men treat their wives as they spend time in the fields and get fruits from their wombs. It highlights the repressed sexuality of women under the patriarchal system. Zaibun-Nissa Hamidullah has criticized men's sexuality and how uncontrolled sexuality can be self-destructive, as at the end of the story, when Ghulam is unable to control his aggression, he dives into the deep well and dies.

Simple Question

The fourth story, *The Simple Question*, explores the theme of sexual objectification of women in a patriarchal society where they are treated as machines to bear male children. The protagonist of the story wishes to have a son because she already has many daughters, and her husband is tired and ill from working hard to fulfill the family's needs; "*Such a restless one this was, even in the stomach; I was sure it was a boy*" (Abbasi, 2001, p.115). This line supports the idea that only a boy can be a relief for his parents, while daughters are a burden, as the parents have to prepare their dowry. After giving birth multiple times and having three of her kids die before birth, the midwife warns her not to have another kid, as the mother is too weak after screaming, bleeding, and cutting during the birth of all her children. The family pressure and the doctor's suggestion that it would be a boy next time made her conceive another baby, revealing that the worth of a woman in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, is to produce male children. This text depicts the story of a family that is facing issues in educating its daughters. At first, they are not willing to let them get educated, but when a teacher encourages the family to send daughters to school, the mother starts asking questions. She asked questions to confirm if education in any way confirms getting a husband and dowry for her daughters. This shows that females, in patriarchal societies, go through psychological struggles throughout their lives. The tragic point in the story is when the teacher, being educated and aware, still could not respond to and satisfy the mother of her concerns. The analysis of the selected short stories shows women in constrictive societal roles that constrain their independence and ability to express themselves. Female characters faced patriarchal expectations demonstrating how cultural norms influence their identities and decisions making power are neglected in it. The narratives also exposed instances of resistance in which women negotiate or question boundaries that have been imposed, but these attempts are frequently hampered by societal constraints. In general, the stories support Beauvoir's assertion that women are positioned as the "other" in societies that are controlled by men.

Conclusion

These Pakistani short stories portray women as victims of social injustice and oppression. Writers have highlighted issues like domestic responsibilities, the aggression of male counterparts, and the suffering of unmarried girls. These sufferings not only reveal the harsh realities of life that females go through but also support the argument presented by Beauvoir that females are seen as 'other' in a dominated society.

Recommendations

To capture more diverse textual constructions of gender, it is recommended that future research expand texts to include a wider variety of Pakistani short fiction. To enhance interpretive understanding, additional research may incorporate complementary analytical frameworks like critical discourse analysis, feminist narratology, or cultural hermeneutics. Furthermore, the critical representations of women in South Asian literary texts may be improved by integrating rigorous close-reading techniques into literature.

References

- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
- Bhasin, K. (2006). *What is patriarchy?*. Kali for Women.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Ferree, M. M. (2006). Globalization and Feminism. In M. M. Ferree & A. M. Tripp (Eds.), *Global Feminism: Transnational women's activism, organizing, and human rights* (pp. 3-23). New York University Press.
- Hashmi, A. (2002). *Woman and fiction: Short stories by Pakistani women*. Oxford University Press.
- Herouach, S. (2019). Liberal Feminism's impact on Moroccan educated women: Faculty of letters and human sciences, FLDM, as a field study. *Open Political Science*, 2(1), 128-152.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Pluto Press.
- Jameel, S. (2019). Women's voices and resistance in Urdu fiction: A feminist reading. *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 7(1), 1-14.
- Kuleli, M. (2019). Marxist Feminist discourse in a Turkish novel with Eugene Nida's concept of "equivalence" applied on translation evaluation of the novel. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 16, 703-722.
- Mushtaq, M. (2022, June 30). Voicelessness of Pakistani women: A postcolonial analysis of Bina Shah's *The Wedding of Sundri*. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues*. <https://jgsi.fjwu.edu.pk/jgsi/article/view/336>
- Nayar, P. K. (2009). *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism*. Pearson Education India.
- Rehman, N., Maqbool, T., & Akhter, S. (2022). The representation of women's identity in *The Holy Woman and Slum Child*. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 4(2), 1048- 1057.
- Siraj, S., Anjum, M. T., Kaka Khel, N., Saddam, M., & Faisal, S. (2021). Elements of women's marginalization in Mohammed Hanif's *our lady of Alice Bhatti*. *Ilkogretim Online – Elementary Education Online*, 20(5), 7427-7434. <https://doi.org/10.17051>
- Steans, J., & Pettiford, L. (2009). *Hubungan internasional: Perspektif dan tema*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Subhani, S. (2022). *Breaking the patriarchal cycle*. Narratives.
- Tandon, N. (2022). Women and Children: Oppression in *The God of small things*. *Multidisciplinary International Journal*, 8.
- Tyson, L. (2014). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. Routledge.
- Yadav, M. A. (n.d.). *Feminism in Taslima Nasrin's work Lajja*.
- Zubair, S., & Shirazi, R. (2014). Gender and education in Pakistan: Conflicting images of women in textbooks and literature. *Oxford Review of Education*, 40(4), 538-555.