



RESEARCH PAPER

**Misogynic Semiosis in American Fiction: A Critical Perspective on
 Female Characters' Dress and Appearance**

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore whether the attire and appearance of female characters in American fiction is a semiosis of patriarchal power. The sociology of dress and appearance was used as the theoretical stance of this research. Two novels, "Gone with the Wind" and "The Help" were selected using criterion sampling. The selected excerpts from these novels were analyzed by Fairclough's three-dimensional method of critical discourse analysis grounded in Halliday's view of language as a semiotic system (1978/2007). Findings from the analysis show that patriarchal values, dominance, misogyny, and the expectation to fulfil feminine norms and socio-economic status are expressed through women's dress. There is also evidence of generic/discursive overlaps which reflect changes in the patriarchal structure of American society, in particular, and by implication in all male-dominated societies in the world including Pakistan. The study has implications for the critical evaluation of ideologies and imagined realities naturalized through literary genres.

KEYWORDS Critical Discourse Analysis, Fiction, Misogyny, Semiosis, Sociology of Dress

Introduction

Clothing is a form of language. Like most languages, it has the ability to convey meanings, ideas and perceptions. It has its own grammar and vocabulary in the form of accessories, makeup, and jewelry. Different dialects exist which pertain to the cultural, regional and temporal setting of the wearer. Humans manipulate and utilize language according to situation or intent and the same is done so with the dress. The language of clothes varies across age, gender, colour, texture, time, culture, opinion, pattern and status (Lurie, 2000). This study focuses on the gendered and temporal aspect of dress in selected American novels; *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, with the aim to unveil the underlying ideology of power. These American novels were chosen, first, on the basis of their popularity and global readership, and second, because of linguistic cues of patriarchal power. Research on women's appearance and dress has cropped up in recent decades, ranging from interviews, magazines, advertisements, and Victorian novels but a gap was present in the context of American society.

Literature Review

Research on women's dress has previously been done in a variety of manners. Hunt and Miller (1997) interviewed eighteen sorority presidents in a US university to examine how the discourse of dress was maintained by talk. According to the study, women held the view that others' choice of dress should be respected; however, there are certain moral, situational, contextual and hygienic requirements that should be met. This contradicts the earlier statement as judgments are made about another's appearance regardless of the claim to respect individual differences. Condemnation was most prominent when it came to 'slutty' appearance and such women were judged as having lower moral status. In contrast, some respondents also related their experience of being criticized for not wearing makeup and being 'natural'.

Norm deviation could be excused under specific conditions e.g. lack of hygiene due to involvement in an accident (Hunt & Miller, 1997). The study highlights the way norms associated with appearance are circulated through talk. This can be related to the discourse of dress at large; the talk expressed in literature, movies, dramas, social media and advertisements all aid in maintaining certain norms which women are expected to fulfil.

One study addressed the discourse of dress and body in a woman's magazine to provide a feminist perspective. Tyner and Ogle (2007) examined the dress-related meanings in *Ms Periodical* from 1972-2002 and found two main themes: oppression and empowerment. Oppression through dress involved narrowly defined ideals which could not be realistically met. Beauty standards arise from male dominance and help in maintaining power imbalance between the genders. Due to the lower status of females, the value of a woman is reduced to her beauty, disregarding other aspects such as personality or intellect (Tyner & Ogle, 2007). In contrast, empowerment is experienced through the rejection of idealistic standards or using the dress for career advancement and self-expression. However, a problem was pointed out in the modern feminist movement: restrictive dress codes for the career woman also presented confining views on 'how a woman should dress' (Wilson 2003; Tyner & Ogle 2007). The study shows that through dress, respectability and self-esteem can be earned in the same way they are lost. Analyzing novels from different time periods could aid in understanding this dilemma, especially when it comes to changing roles of a woman from wife and mother to career lady.

Victorian Literature from 1860 to 1900 was analyzed by Seys (2019) in which a woman's character is signified by her dress. *A Double Thread* was analyzed, in which twin sisters are separated and face different lives. One is an innocent governess and her dress is described as plain. The other is rich and arrogant, thus she is described as gaudy. At the end of the novel, both women are revealed to be the same person, with an emphasis that the real woman is fashionable. Seys (2019) points out how *A Woman in White* set the standard of an ideal, virtuous, virginal and familial woman (i.e. Angel in the House) in the Victorian era.

Hughes (2010) highlights the way the dress is used to determine women's morals in late Victorian women's fiction. It was found that stays and hoops signified a woman's sexuality and discarding them would be immoral. *From Man to Man* it was noted that one sister dressed gaudily after a scandal and another dressed plainly to showcase her intellect. Hughes (2010) states "Fictional dress may be modest but is rarely trivial; it is dress given life and meaning within an imagined world" (p. 539). Though novels present 'fictional dress' and 'imagined world', it is from real life that discourse is picked up and incorporated into the story. The discourse of dress in novels reflects society's actual perception of the relationship between women's dress, character and morals. Most of the research done is on

Victorian literature and does not show how discourse has evolved over larger periods of time. Consequently, a gap is presented which will be addressed in this research paper by incorporating *The Help*.

In conclusion, there are certain recurring themes present in the literature on women's dress. Oppression of women through idealistic norms, rejection of the real woman, emphasis on virginity, moral and character judgment through outward appearance and emphasis on beauty rather than intellect, personality and character.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the scope of this study, we must first understand what the term 'dress' implies. Dress includes all instances of possible body modifications or supplements found across personal, national, social, religious and cultural boundaries (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). According to this, clothing, hair, piercings, tattoos, perfumes, hats, shoes, parasols, bags, skin tanning, jewelry, accessories and cosmetics are classified as types of dress. Senses of touch, taste, sound, sight and hearing are engaged when experiencing 'dress', therefore, colour, texture and shape are inclusive of this term. Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) were the first to develop a definition of dress and to provide a theoretical framework for dress and identity. The framework emphasized the social aspect of dress and how social interaction is the primary means by which dress is used to communicate, establish and predict identities. Individuals try to convey their social identity to others via dress and can predict how people would react to their appearance based on previous experiences. Beliefs about morality, aesthetics and propriety vary across different societies and time periods (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). The variable of time and space is important in understanding what is being communicated through dress. This study will also address the variable of time to analyze whether the discourse of women's dress has changed in American novels from the 1860s to the 1960s.

Along with the changing ideals about the dress, outward appearance is also manipulated to aid individuals in their lives. In *The Social Psychology of Dress*, Lennon et al. (2017) noted that dress is used by individuals to achieve certain goals e.g. dressing for a job interview, asserting social prestige, gaining societal acceptance, acquiring self-confidence etc. Individuals convey their identity through their appearance. On the basis of this, they are either respected or criticized.

Similarly, Lurie (2000) considered dress to be a language. Individuals communicate their gender, age, class and other important information before any verbal words have been spoken. In her book, *The Language of Clothes*, the dress was categorized by different variables such as age, time, place, status, gender, sex, colour and pattern. An individual's dress is able to communicate or miscommunicate their opinions, beliefs, moods and sexual tastes (Lurie, 2000). With changing social, political, religious and philosophical viewpoints, dress changes accordingly. An interesting point to note is the addition of the word 'miscommunicate'. This implies that the apparent impression about someone's dress may not be accurate. For women's dress, this becomes particularly important as oftentimes a woman's character or morals are determined by outward appearance.

In *Theory of Leisure Class*, Veblen (2009) has highlighted the extravagant lifestyle of the elites who aim to distinguish themselves and their wealth. Possession of wealth on its own, he posits, is not enough to express power. Rather, wealth must be boasted through the consumption of desirable goods. By doing this, an individual (usually a man), is able to provide evidence of wealth and power. The woman's dress, in particular, is evidence of wealth with its frivolous decorations and unproductive nature. The bonnet, corset, heels,

skirts and long hair prevent a woman from engaging in labour which makes her economically dependent on a man (Veblen, 2009).

This economic dependence further implies that the man, to whom such a woman belongs, is wealthy enough to afford her leisure and extravagance of attire. Therefore, the woman is seen as another possession which showcases wealth. Her dress (and the idleness that results) is for the sake of the man's power and status (Veblen, 2009). This theory also coincides with Baker's (2006) analysis that heterosexual marriage sustains the Self/Other binary, in which man is dominant and woman is subservient. This study notes how subservience is also demonstrated through dress.

Material and Methods

The overall purpose of this study was to find the way women's appearance and dress determine how they are viewed in American society. Power, hegemony, patriarchy and misogyny are perpetuated through symbolic meanings/semiosis of women's dress. American novels were selected to highlight these concepts through textual analysis as American society is, historically, a prototype of patriarchal norms. As the data was word-based, the qualitative research design was selected to address the research questions derived from the review of literature related to the problem of the present study.

Sample Selection

The aim of this study was to provide insight into the discourse of women's dress in American novels over the span of time. Women's appearance and the discourse around it have been researched before but there is a gap in terms of American literature and how discourse may have changed over time. In order to address this, two American novels: *Gone With the Wind* and *The Help* have been chosen for CDA.

These novels are set in the years the 1860s and 1960s respectively. It could have been possible to find a novel which represented every decade to provide a more detailed analysis of discourse. However, the sample size was restricted to two in light of the observation that the discourse of dress does not change distinctly over a short period of time and larger time gaps are required to see any real difference. In selecting samples, novels with a significant amount of content regarding dress were chosen. Incidentally, 72 pages in *Gone With the Wind* and 51 pages in *The Help* had dress-related content in the EBook files.

Another aspect kept in mind was the popularity of novels. This was based on awards, the number of reviews, and media coverage. *Gone With the Wind* is a classic bestselling novel and holds a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. *The Help* is a multimillion seller with several awards to its name. Each novel has film adaptations with successful viewership. The popularity of novels was important to consider because media and literature aid in reflecting or circulating different kinds of discourse in society, including that of dress. They form new narratives within people's mind and also represent already existing social discourse. Considering this, the two novels were deemed appropriate for carrying out this research.

Data Collection

After the selection of the novels, an in-depth study was done of each while taking note of dress-related content. In order to find relevant material and data, dress-related terms were sought from the search bar within the EBook files of the two novels. These terms

included (but were not restricted to): 'dress', 'skirt', 'gown', 'slipper', 'shoe', 'frock', 'hat', 'shirt', 'pant' and 'heel'. Word searches differed according to the context of novels, for example, 'shirt' was searched for in *The Help* but not for *Gone With the Wind* as women did not wear separate shirts at the time.

Analytic Framework

This study adopted the three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (2014) to analyze discourse about women's dress in selected American novels. CDA is a methodology to analyze sociological realities via language. It was developed in 1970 at the University of East Anglia based on Halliday's Functional Linguistics. It aims to unveil the hidden meaning of discourse.

Any discourse has the ability to provide insight into how the social world is being constructed and what power structures exist. It does this by looking into macro and microstructures (van Dijk, 2015). The micro level involves the analysis of the structure of language i.e. how vocabulary, grammar, syntax and semantics have been utilized in a text. The macro level involves the analysis of the schema i.e. the context around which the text was made for instance the era, region, history, politics and socio-economic situation.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (2014) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis includes textual analysis (description), discourse practice (interpretation) and sociocultural practice (explanation).

Results and Discussion

Textual Analysis (Description)

Linguistic features aid in understanding the power structures and underlying discourse of a text (Fairclough, 2014). Some linguistic features include vocabulary, expressions, grammar, allegory, similes, synonyms, cohesion, formality, metaphors, euphemisms, rewording, modality and ambiguity.

In *Gone with the Wind*, the following text shows linguistic features: "...magnolia-white skin—that skin so prized by Southern women and so carefully guarded with bonnets, veils and mittens against hot Georgia suns" (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 1)

The word 'skin' is repeated to emphasize how a fair complexion is a woman's asset and multiple articles of clothing are needed to guard it. Adjectives like 'magnolia' and 'white' imply darker complexions are unworthy. Although 'skin' is not necessarily part of body modification, the aim to preserve certain features of it makes it inclusive of the term 'dress'. Similarly, it was stated: "Before marriage, young girls must be, above all other things, sweet, gentle, beautiful and ornamental...." (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 3).

Modality is a feature used to emphasize authority. By using the word 'must', the writer has classified certain traits which should be followed by young girls to be accepted by society. The words 'beautiful' and 'ornamental' have been organized together, pointing out how beauty is related to outward embellishments. 'Ornamental' also implies a quality of being non-human. The worth of a woman is reduced to how pleasing she would be to the eye. 'Before marriage' implies that the purpose of ornamentation is to acquire a suitor.

In another paragraph, allegory was utilized thus:

She lay in the silvery shadows with courage rising and made the plans that a sixteen-year-old makes when life has been so pleasant that defeat is an impossibility and a pretty dress and a clear complexion are weapons to vanquish fate (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 4)

Dress and fair skin tone are called the 'weapons' of a girl. They provide the means to 'vanquish fate'. A clear relation between a woman's success and her dress is made. The 'plans', in this context, were to acquire a husband. However, the former part of the paragraph indicates that it is a naive, sheltered child who would think that a pretty dress could solve all problems.

According to Fairclough (2014), language also has a relational value in which derogatory vocabulary is used to represent the ideology of the speaker and other participants about certain member groups. Such vocabulary may include racist, xenophobic, misogynistic or prejudiced words. In *The Help*, prejudice was shown towards a new woman in town by referring to her dress "I look down and see the fool doesn't have any shoes on, like some kind of white trash. Nice white ladies don't go around barefoot" (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 3)

Two negative terms have been used in the same sentence: 'fool' and 'white trash'. Both of these are with reference to the woman not wearing shoes. The absence of a particular item of dress causes the woman to be viewed with prejudice. The word 'white trash' represents the viewpoints of not just the speaker but also other members of society. The woman is regarded in a derogatory way because she did not follow the norm of 'nice white ladies'. Of interest here is the word 'nice', which is associated with a woman's appearance rather than character. Additional incidences of the importance of dress in *The Help* were described like this: "I saw the list by Miss Celia's bed. Of what else she needs to do for the Benefit: Get fingernails done. Go to the panty-hose store. Get tuxedo martinized and pressed. Call Miss Hilly" (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 24).

Ordering is a linguistic feature which lists more important items first. In this paragraph, Miss Celia notes getting 'fingernails done' and acquiring 'panty hose' as the most pressing matters. This implies that a woman's outward appearance is of prime importance when attending an event.

Discourse Practice (Interpretation)

The discourse practice stage shows the interpretation of texts by member participants. This involves the text producer and receiver. Participants utilize member resources (MR) to come up with interpretations of a discourse. MR can also be called background knowledge. Situational context, culture, political setting and schema determine how participants would interpret the discourse. By looking into the coherence, presuppositions and intertextuality of discourse we can provide analysis for this stage of CDA (Fairclough, 2014).

In *Gone With the Wind*, the following incident is insightful: "Scarlett obeyed, bracing herself and catching firm hold of one of the bedposts. Mammy pulled and jerked vigorously and, as the tiny circumference of whalebone-girdled waist grew smaller; a proud, fond look came into her eyes" (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 5)

It is presupposed that having a large or average size waist is not preferred; rather a tiny waist is most desirable. Moreover, Scarlett's waist was already tiny to begin with; yet, measures were taken to make it even smaller. These measures required 'pulling' and 'jerking' for which the protagonist had to 'brace herself'. It is presupposed that to attain

beauty, discomfort must be experienced and this notion is accepted. A contrast of undesirable traits was also presented later on in *Gone With the Wind* (2008):

At the same moment, Scarlett's eye was caught by a figure on the sidewalk in a brightly colored dress--too bright for street wear--covered by a Paisley shawl with fringes to the heels. Turning she saw a tall handsome woman with a bold face and a mass of red hair, too red to be true. It was the first time she had ever seen any woman who she knew for certain had "done something to her hair" and she watched her, fascinated. "Good Heavens!" thought Scarlett, repressed into silence. That must be a bad woman!" (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 8)

It is presupposed here that it was extremely uncommon for women to dye their hair. Upon seeing a woman with artificial red hair, Scarlett immediately judges her to be a 'bad woman' which in this context means a prostitute. The woman was also wearing a dress 'too bright for day wear' which implies that muted tones are more appropriate for daytime. By going against norms, a woman is considered immoral. However, Scarlett's perception of the woman did fit the context perfectly because the woman was indeed a prostitute. The author purposely produced a description which would fit the societal perceptions about a bad woman and make the most sense to the readers of that time. According to Fox (2022), women are exploited and misrepresented by literary, visual and digital media. They are portrayed and mediated through hegemonic and patriarchal structures of power. As readers, we must try to remediate, deconstruct and reconstruct meaning to reach the narrative which is withheld from the audience. The remediated meaning that we can derive from the above passage could be that a woman with dyed hair may not necessarily be a prostitute, a prostitute may not necessarily wear bright clothes and making judgements about a character based only on appearance is restrictive.

The perception that certain appearances are related to prostitutes can be found in *The Help* as well: "She's wearing a tight red sweater and a red skirt and enough makeup to scare a hooker" (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 3)

Even though the woman has not directly been called a 'hooker', the statement that she could 'scare' one indicates that she is dressed in a similar or even worse fashion. This is akin to the observation in *Gone With the Wind*. Intertextuality is the connection of discourses with previous ones (Fairclough, 2014). The discourse of dress travels over time and similar interpretations were made by the participants in these two, separate novels. The words 'tight red sweater' and 'tight skirt' allude that this was an improper way of dressing, much like the bright-coloured dress of the prostitute in *Gone With the Wind*.

Intertextuality was also noted with the colour red. In both cases, red was associated with immorality. In the first incidence, it was in relation to hair and in the second it was in relation to the attire. This discourse fits with *The Social Psychology of dress* in which the colour red is associated with feminine sexuality and lust (Guéguen & Jacob, 2012; Johnson et al. 2014). The moral and sexual behaviour of women was questioned on the basis of their dress.

Another recurring theme was the way women are expected to improve their appearance. In *Gone With the Wind* this was done by reducing waist size and protecting a fair complexion. In *The Help* it was done like this:

She rubs the cream in my hair with both hands. I can practically feel the hope in her fingers. A cream will not straighten my nose or take a foot off my height. It won't add distinction to my almost translucent eyebrows, nor add weight to my bony frame. And my teeth are already perfectly straight. So this is all she has left to fix, my hair (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 8)

This paragraph shows different undesirable traits in a woman. It is implied that a tall, bony woman with translucent brows is unfeminine. Incidentally, the only desirable trait that the character had was 'straight teeth' and the only thing that could be fixed was her hair which was done by applying cream to make it straighter. The intertextuality of 'fixing' the appearance of women travelled across different time periods.

Another instance of intertextuality was about the behaviour of women. *The Help* noted:

Ever so often, I come to work and find her bawling in her crib, Miss Leefolt busy on the sewing machine rolling her eyes like it's a stray cat stuck in the screen door. See, Miss Leefolt, she dress up nice ever day. Always got her makeup on, got a carport, double-door Frigidaire with the built-in icebox. You see her in the Jitney 14 grocery; you never think she go and leave her baby crying in her crib like that. But the help always know. (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 1)

An uncaring mother is described who does not comfort her crying baby. Her coldness is emphasized when she rolls her eyes and considers her child to be no better than an animal. Following this description, the author immediately described the woman's dress which is so well put together that it contradicts her uncaring behaviour. A nice dress should also reflect a nice personality yet here the woman displays the opposite. The way such women are interpreted follows a particular order: 1) the Bad behaviour of the woman in question is outlined in the situational context 2) the Nice dress or appearance of a said woman is described 3) The contrast between dress and behaviour is pointed out.

Explanation and Discussion

The third stage of CDA shows how discourse is a form of social practice and social structures that sustain ideas in society. Power relations determine the kind of discourse produced. A detailed sociological analysis can be found via discourse by looking at power relationships, ideologies and effects of discourse on society (Fairclough, 2014).

The discourse on women's dress highlights the power imbalance experienced by women. According to Veblen (2009), a woman's dress demonstrates her economic dependence on her husband and rather than belonging to the self, she belongs to the man. Her existence must beautify her household and she is the chief ornament. Additionally, her purpose is to provide evidence of the man's wealth through her attire. This notion was present in *Gone With the Wind*: "Gerald was happy, pleasantly excited over the prospect of spending the day shouting about the Yankees and the war, and proud of his three pretty daughters in their bright spreading hoop skirts beneath foolish little lace parasols" (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 5)

Two contradicting words 'proud' and 'foolish' were used here. He knows it is foolish to dress in such a manner with ornamented parasols but is proud nonetheless because his daughters look pretty, much like prized possessions to show off to others. He is able to give proof of his wealth by providing for such extravagant and foolish expenses.

Another notion presented in *Theory of Leisure Class*, is the need to demonstrate idleness through a woman's attire (Veblen, 2009). An idle woman shows that she is not in need of earning a livelihood as she is already financially provided for. Her leisure demonstrates the socioeconomic class of her household. Gowns, hoops, heels and corsets prevent women from making any useful exertion. *Gone With the Wind* noted: "She was panting, for her stays were laced too tightly to permit much running." (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 2)

Additionally, a woman's dress is used to acquire a wealthy suitor who would meet her financial needs and make exertion unnecessary. This was highlighted in *Gone With the Wind* when Scarlett, the protagonist, was facing debt amidst the Civil War and decided to make a green velvet dress which could help ensnare Rhett, a wealthy bachelor. Her plight can be noted in the following way: "Scarlett said a brief prayer of thanksgiving that the rain of the previous night had ceased, for she had lain awake listening to it, knowing that it would mean the ruin of her velvet dress and new bonnet" (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 34)

In this, the concern for rain is not about catching a cold, but rather about ruining a dress. It seems a foolish concern at first, but within the context, a perfect dress might acquire a rich husband like Rhett who could solve Scarlett's financial crisis and save her from further misery. It is not the dress being ruined that worries her. Rather she is worried about ruining her chance of financial stability. This is further highlighted by the fact that women were not allowed to earn money in the 1860s and had to resort to other means to solve their financial concerns, which meant marrying a wealthy man. The discourse of dress shows the lack of economic freedom given to women. A woman's dress also alludes to her relationship with men as was pointed out in *Gone With the Wind*:

Under the arbor sat the married women, their dark dresses decorous notes in the surrounding color and gaiety. Matrons, regardless of their ages, always grouped together apart from the bright-eyed girls, beaux and laughter, for there were no married belles in the South (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 6)

And:

A widow had to wear hideous black dresses without even a touch of the braid to enliven them, no flower or ribbon or lace or even jewelry, except onyx mourning brooches or necklaces made from the deceased's hair. And the black crêpe veil on her bonnet had to reach to her knees, and only after three years of widowhood could it be shortened to shoulder length. Widows could never chatter vivaciously or laugh aloud. Even when they smiled, it must be a sad, tragic smile. And, most dreadful of all, they could in no way indicate an interest in the company of gentlemen. And should a gentleman be so ill bred as to indicate an interest in her, she must freeze him with a dignified but well-chosen reference to her dead husband (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 7)

Belles can only be unmarried girls. The main purpose of dress and beauty is to acquire a husband. Married women must dress in more sedate colours to emphasize they are not looking for another man's attention while widows dress solely for mourning. This shows the power imbalance between men and women in society. In *Gone With the Wind*, dress showcased the hegemony of men not only in social and economic terms but also in terms of intellect:

She knew how to smile so that her dimples leaped how to walk pigeon-toed so that her wide hoop skirts swayed entrancingly, how to look up into a man's face and then drop her eyes and bat the lids rapidly so that she seemed a-tremble with gentle emotion. Most of all she learned how to conceal from men a sharp intelligence beneath a face as sweet and bland as a baby's (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 3)

The dress can be utilized to give the impression of silliness and to manipulate others. The following paragraph also demonstrates the way the dress was used to view women as being of lesser intellect:

Her green gown...showed off her slender figure with its tiny waist to perfection, and how bewitching was the faint fragrance which always clung about her handkerchief and her hair! It was a shame that such a fine little woman should be alone and helpless in a world so rough that she didn't

even understand its harshness...He couldn't help laughing at her ignorance about business matters and she laughed too, saying: "Well, of course, you can't expect a silly little woman like me to understand men's affairs." She made him feel, for the first time in his old-maidish life, that he was a strong upstanding man fashioned by God in a nobler mold than other men, fashioned to protect silly helpless women...It had begun to dawn on him that this same sweet pretty little head was a "good head for figures." In fact, a much better one than his own and the knowledge was disquieting. He was thunderstruck to discover that she could swiftly add a long column of figures in her head when he needed a pencil and paper for more than three figures. And fractions presented no difficulties to her at all. He felt there was something unbecoming about a woman understanding fractions and business matters and he believed that, should a woman be so unfortunate as to have such unladylike comprehension, she should pretend not to (Mitchell, 2008, Chapter 36)

A contrast was presented in which acceptable femininity for a woman entails that she must dress prettily and also be ignorant about matters like business or finance. However, it was found that the woman in question was good at mathematics which was seen as a contradiction to her feminine appearance. Moreover, this observation was made by the man before and after he married this woman. After marriage, he came to know of her talent with numbers which he did not possess. Such a revelation was a hit for his dominant position in the marriage. According to Baker (2006), the Self/another binarism, in which the Self is a man and the Other is a woman, provides a social matrix in which marriage is 'guaranteed'. For a traditional marriage to be 'successful', gender inequality needs to be sustained which translates to a dominant man and subservient wife. The discourse of dress unveils this social matrix.

In contrast, *The Help* is set over a hundred years after *Gone With the Wind* and women have relatively more economic freedom. Women can work and earn for themselves which was not possible in *Gone With the Wind*, however, the power dynamic between the genders is still reminiscent of a century ago. As noted in *The Help*: "Red pen in hand, I scan the squat, single column under HELP WANTED FEMALE...Trim, young secretary wanted. Typing not nec. Call Mr. Sanders...Jesus, if he doesn't want her to type, what does he want her to do?" (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 5)

This is a job advertisement seen by the character. The requirement pertains to the appearance of the applicant rather than other qualities. Though the word 'dress' or its synonyms have not been utilized, words such as 'trim' and 'young' indicate aspects of dress which should be beautified to acquire these jobs. Upon closer inspection, it seems the same strategy to acquire a suitor is also used to acquire a job. 'Typing not necessary' alludes that she would not be asked to work productively; her purpose is something else.

In *The Help*, women are now working but society seems to be in a transition phase. Though they seek jobs, their requirement is similar to what was required of a wife. Previously, women were to be ornamentation for the household and representative of the man they were married to. Now in work, as was pointed out for the requirements of a secretary, the woman was to be ornamentation for the office and representative of the man who was her employer. In both incidences, the underlying discourse seems to root from the same perspective: that a woman does not belong to herself and her primary function, demonstrated via dress, is to improve the image of the man who holds more power. The dominance of men is expressed through the dress of a woman.

Considering this, the efforts to acquire a suitor in *The Help* are also similar to a century ago:

By sixteen I wasn't just not pretty, I was painfully tall. The kind of tall that puts a girl in the back row of class pictures with the boys. The kind of tall where your mother spends her nights taking down hems, yanking at sweater sleeves, flattening your hair for dances you hadn't been asked to, finally pressing the top of your head as if she could shrink you back to the years when she had to remind you to stand up straight.....Mrs. Charlotte Phelan's Guide to Husband-Hunting, Rule Number One: a pretty, petite girl should accentuate with makeup and good posture. A tall plain one, with a trust fund. I was five-foot-eleven but I had twenty-five thousand cotton dollars in my name and if the beauty in that was not apparent then, by God, he wasn't smart enough to be in the family anyway (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 5)

Yet again, the efforts to improve a woman's appearance to increase her prospects of getting a husband are highlighted. But an additional factor is included for those who cannot be beautified adequately: a trust fund. In neither of these two scenarios is the intellect or personality of a woman given any relevance.

Another aspect in the discourse of women's dress, which has travelled across time, is the judgment of a woman's morals. *The Help* notes:

She...comes back holding two hot pink gowns, smiling all over them. They're long to the floor, covered in sparkles and sequins, slits up the leg. Both hang by straps thin as chicken wire...She swishes the dress from side to side...I think about her rattling around the party in that thing. Whatever the white version of a juke joint hussy is, that's what they'll be calling her (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 24)

In *Gone With the Wind*, a woman was similarly judged for her attire and she was a prostitute. *The Help* provides a contrast. The woman who is being called a 'juke joint hussy' is a friendly housewife. There is no incidence of her participating in immoral activities. She is one of the two women in the novel who does not display racism against the black working community. The judgment based on her attire did not reflect her actual character as was the case in *Gone With the Wind*. This reflects the suggestion presented previously, that dress is able to communicate or miscommunicate ideas, beliefs, morals and sexual tastes of an individual (Lurie, 2000).

Additionally, moral judgment is primarily done by women. In *The Help*, the aforementioned woman was shunned by others:

They didn't even ask me in the house. They made me stand out on the steps like a vacuum salesman." I turn around and her eyes are down to the floor. "Why, Minny?" she whispers. What can I say? Your clothes, your hair, your boobies in the size-nothing sweaters...I remember what Aibileen heard at Miss Leefolt's, of why the League ladies don't like her. (Stockett, 2016, Chapter 24)

It would appear that the way women view other women is a big factor in reproducing and sustaining discourse about the dress. Throughout these novels, mothers, maids and other female acquaintances have led or regulated the perceptions set by society. This aligns with the study of Hunt and Miller (2007) where condemnation from the respondents (all women) was most prominent when it came to 'sleazy' appearance.

Conclusion

The discussion of results of CDA of the sampled fiction supports the main stance of this study that women's dress alludes primarily to the power imbalance between men and women, for instance, the subservience of women in marriage. Women dress to meet certain goals. Ideals of beauty dictate how women should dress. Ideals may change as time passes but the expectation to fulfil them does not.

Further, there is evidence to suggest a degree of discomfort is experienced in the pursuit of meeting such ideals via corsets, heels or other items of dress. This discomfort is usually accepted and considered normal. Dress signifies the wealth of the owner. In the two novels, this was the husband or the father. On the moral plane, it was noted in the analysis that a woman's character and morality are judged by her attire, especially by other women. Showing more skin and the colour red is correlated with being sexually active or immoral, regardless of the woman's actual character. Misogynistic perceptions are circulated via the discourse of dress. Dress and appearance were the only desirable traits of women in these novels.

The American novels analyzed in this study, though have temporal distance, have considerable parallels with Pakistan's patriarchal society. Though there have been emerging changes regarding the status of women, discourse loaded with misogynistic ideologies has been materialized by textual resources. Judgement of women based on skin tone, weight and dress is unfortunately very common. The notion of 'honour' and obsession with marriageability, which is sustained through the discourse of dress, still abounds. An in-depth understanding of these narratives makes us reflect on our own thought processes and we are able to learn why certain opinions may be present in our minds.

The findings of the study also highlighted a paradoxical semiosis which reveals misogynistic mindset held by women for other women with regards to moral character regardless of their actual behavior. Analysis and awareness of such perceptions surfaced in American fiction may prevent us from jumping to hasty conclusions about another individual while also promoting a more positive change in society.

Women's dress and appearance holds discourse about larger power structures and social narratives in society. The findings of this study have affirmed previous discourses. In selecting the sample size, one of the aims was to find novels with significant discourse on women's dress so that adequately relevant was obtained for valid analysis. This consideration led to selection of novels written only by women, perhaps because women are more concerned with the details of dress. Consequently, a gap is presented in which future research can be done specifically on novels written by men to provide another gender's perception and narrative regarding this discourse. The semiotics of dress across different cultures may also provide more of a comparison about which notions are universal and which are more region specific.

Though modern women also choose how they want to dress as a form of self-expression, this does not exempt them from the expectations of society. It is this dimension of counter-discourse that needs to be addressed in future studies. It is also recommended that interdisciplinary perspectives should be incorporated to broaden the theoretical stance of such studies about the important half of humanity.

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