

Female Subjectivity and Discursive Body: A Feminist Reading of Selected Short Stories of Pakistani Women Writers

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Abstract

Female subjectivity arises from the Cartesian mind and body dichotomy, categorising women as emotional subjects. When women began writing to assert their identity, they recognised the inadequacy of patriarchal language in expressing their trauma and inner feelings. Feminists also advocated discussing the specific female experiences related to their maternal bodies using fragmented, non-linear and disrupted language. This paper explores how women reclaim their subjectivity by addressing their tormented and exploited bodies. This investigation is rooted in Islamic feminism and examines selected Pakistani women's short stories to highlight the contributions of women in addressing the realities and problems they face. This paper consists of five core parts. The first part focuses on the socio-political and religious context in the evolution of Islamic feminism. The second part delves into the language of women. The third part explores the theme of the body and how the wounds on the body transform into a new language of resistance and oppression. The fourth part analyses the feminist interpretation of six selected short stories by emerging Pakistani women writers, primarily highlighting their contributions to creating spaces for women. The fifth part offers a multifaceted reading of the texts and short stories through various feminist perspectives. In summary, this paper examines how society and the Islamic religion have discredited women's bodies and how women have responded through their writing.

Keywords: Female Subjectivity, Discursive Body, Islamic Feminism, Pakistani Women Writers.

Introduction

The evolution of women's literature aimed to confront the gender disparities women experienced by focusing on their themes and exploring innovative approaches to express their concerns. Instead of dealing with versatile concepts already part of public discourse, women's writing tended towards more unique and specific experiences. The Third Wave feminist movement of the 1990s advocated an exclusive language system for women, distinct from traditional patriarchal language. Most women discussed their bodies in these articulatory spaces, breaking earlier notions of the body as an emotional, weak entity. Women's bodies became revolutionary subjects in writings, opening new narratives through an organised women's language.

This paper focuses on the selected Pakistani Women's short stories to outline the women's contribution in addressing the realities

and problems of women. According to the famous Pakistani writer Intizar Hussain, two forces have risen in contemporary Pakistan: women and the mullahs (Memon 377-410). He observes that short story writing took a different form and style after the partition. Though the women longed for freedom from double colonisation, they found writing as a means to voice out those silenced experiences and efforts. In such writings, they try to expose and open up the realities of the societies in which they live. Also, their scripts ignite open discussion and criticism, especially during and after the partition.

Writers like Saadat Hasan Manto severely opposed the partition of India, and for him, it was an “overwhelming tragedy” and “maddeningly senseless” (Manzoor 3). His writing model, especially his characters, represents the stance of partition and the cultural shock. Similarly, the later women writers took inspiration from this and introspected the gulf between their existence and social reality in a male-dominated society. They create faceless characters through which they represent plurality among women. These stories also encompass the basic tenets of Foucault, such as the “Discursive Body” and power domination on the body’s agency. Moreover, the pressure exerted by patriarchy, religion, and the legal system on the female body to degrade them as vulnerable is epitomised in these stories.

This paper consists of five core parts. The first part focuses on the social, political, and religious ambience in the evolution of Islamic feminism, encompassing the proponents during the early conception period and the theoretical ideology they tried to convey to humanity. The second part deals with the language of women, which deviates from the phallogentric language into a more productive, organised, and dynamic thought pattern or expression and represents women’s cognitive and physical entities in the form of language. The third part is about the subject of the body and how the wounds on the body transform into a new language of revolt and oppression. The fourth part copes with the feminist reading of six selected short stories by new Pakistani writers, especially exploring the contributions of these writers in creating spaces for women-oriented discussions. The fifth part provides a kaleidoscopic reading of the fourth part through different feminist lenses. In short, it offers an open examination of how society and the Islamic religion have damaged women’s bodies and how women have counter-reacted.

The Place and Scope of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism emerged during the 1990s and critically examined the role of women in Islam. According to the historian Margot Badran, Islamic feminism derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeking rights and justice for both women and men in the totality of their existence (*Feminism* 154). This concept drew inspiration from the counter-movements against Western colonisation. Apart from the selective interpretations and preachings of the Quran, individual readers, particularly women, began reading it independently. These readings later triggered heated debates, introspection, and severe criticism, leading to questions about how wrongly women were defined and structured under the label of religion.

Similarly, the Hadith, or the words, actions, and silent approval of Prophet Muhammad, was re-investigated and redefined more liberally because the Quran envisaged gender equality. All these new perceptions paved the way for later feminist movements in a more positive way. As a result, women proponents started to re-investigate feminism along with religion. The early pioneers were Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Fatema Mernissi, Aziza al Hibri, Riffat Hassan, Lamrabet, and Barlas. Even though they had differences and disparities in their diverse ideologies, themes, and expressions, they converged in women’s expressions in general.

Islamic feminism envisions gender equality, social justice, and women’s liberation. Though they continued to argue with patriarchal norms in many ways, they strove to find a place among the dominant white or elite feminism. The doubly colonised, unprivileged, marginalised women

designed a more liberal, inclusive space for themselves, regionalised as Islamic feminism. It empowered them when they were in the clutches of religious influence or under the dominance of their men. However, later, some Islamic feminists started questioning the phrase 'Islamic' in the title, resulting in a divergence into two distinctive thought groups. One group adheres to religious norms by following and practising the rules unquestioningly. They reflect their religion in their open accounts as Muslims. Meanwhile, the other group encompasses a liberal, free cult, exposing the falsity of religion as over-dominating or power-inducing. In both these currents, there were limitations as well as advantages.

Lacan compared language to consciousness in terms of its complexity. During language development for communication between people, humans designed it according to their thought system, including the vocabulary and structure of the prescribed language. Feminists advocate that just like the difference between women and men, women's imaginative and cognitive realm is also distinct. As a result, they propose the need and necessity of a language system suited for their literary, creative, and imaginative expressions to reclaim their position as creators of the text. Some of the similar theoretical currents are Virginia Woolf's 'female language' (a language of her own), Helene Cixous's 'l'écriture feminine,' in which she argues for writing about the body, Julia Kristeva's 'chora' (a fluid, non-linear, elliptical, mystical writing), Maggie Humm's 'gynographic writing' (the body as a source of language), and Lucy Irigaray's 'phallogocentrism.'

Apart from the deferential, apologetic, and passive language, active women writers strengthen the argument that women's discussions should not be about mainstream topics of interest or what society expects from them; instead, women's unspoken and unknown unique experiences must be articulated. As Julia Kristeva suggests, it is a stance where we reject and dismiss the 'Maternal Regulation.' For Cixous, it embraces the multiple thresholds of the libidinal flow in a unique 'White Ink.' In a way, feminist theorists justify that, just as gender disparities exist among people, the bodily functions and the stimulated responses may vary among genders. As a result, women's bodies may provide versatile experiences, so they have to stand for their bodily discourses and narratives. By eliminating the Cartesian 'unthinking substance' position of females, the female body, female sexuality, and female subjectivity are taken into consideration. Women's bodies are revolutionary and unattainable for men, making them more powerful.

Discursive Body and Power Dominations

Ancient discussions considered the body, a flesh covered by skin, and the mind was considered the centre of rationality. Later theorists advocated that mind and body should not be studied in isolation because the body influences the mind and vice versa. In the case of women's bodies, even minute bodily functions can influence their mental processes. During third-wave feminism, women fiercely discussed the seasonal modulations in their bodies and the simultaneous fluctuations in their cognitive realm. They started to look into the possibilities and limitations of the biology of the female body, especially the reproductive body. However, they rejected sophisticated stereotypes like self-sacrificing mothers, faithful wives, and fragile beings.

The normative female bodily functions are directed and hindered by patriarchal reproductive technologies. In reaction to this, feminist thinkers began to address the encroachments on the privacy of the female body and seriously interrogate issues such as forced abortion, sterilisation, menstruation control, and pregnancy protection measures. Similarly, Foucault advocated that the authorities try to exercise power to dominate, even in corporeal punishment. When power is used to control the weaker or 'the other', they realise their human body is a tool for religion to exploit in terms of sanity, purity, and rescue from sin.

Regarding the beauty myth, the female body is constantly forced to fit into the curves that suit men's gaze. However, her body's ethical or moral existence or sustainability is never considered

when it is overruled and dominated by religion, culture, and patriarchal norms. When the body endures torture by the authority, it can give voice to what the pain has gone through, and thus the body becomes a discourse.

The uneven socio-economic development influences the status of women in Pakistan. With limited educational opportunities, women have started emerging to be involved in various fields of the country. After the partition, the socio-political unrest in Pakistan led women to be victimised by horrifying experiences and subsequent trauma. The new generation writers enlisted in this article are critically approaching Pakistan in the present context from a feminist angle. They write for their fellow women who have gone through the cases of rape, honour killings, murder, and forced marriages. This is mainly because of the Islamic dominant ideology and religiously bounded morale. So, women have been victimised and severely affected by the male-dominated religious system. In addition, as representatives of patriarchal norms, the men have induced restrictions and monopolies on women. In a way, these stories provide a glimpse into the condition of women in Pakistan.

Sonia Naheed Kamal's "The Bread" discusses female infanticide and the breastfeeding ban among new mothers who deliver a girl child. Though the nameless narrator ardently wants to behold her newborn girl child at least once with her motherly affection, she is forced to hand over her child to be buried alive. Meanwhile, the mother ends up breastfeeding and nursing another child and is caught in the act by her mother, Aji. The merciless tribunal that maintains law and order sentences her to have one breast chopped off as punishment. This story sheds light on how the privileged patriarchal society demeans the birth of a girl child and continuously threatens the existence of being or living as a woman. Society predominates husbands' words and opinions and allows them to dispose of marriage or divorce their wives easily. The protagonist hints at her destiny to be another Aji by stating the punishment as "a pound of flesh" (Jalil 73).

Beena Shah's "The Wedding of Sundri" is a tale about child marriage and the enforced morality upon a woman by society. Sundri steps into the 'world of pain' or womanhood through menstruation, and the other women predict her future of severe pain in the ordeal of marriage. Later, on the same day of her wedding, she becomes a victim of moral policing, and her dead body is returned to her home, along with shame to her community. The accusation against her is that she had been spotted playing with boys, and the mob executes her. Society sympathises with the groom as a victim of a wrongful marriage, so a woman in the crowd gifts her daughter to him as a tribute. Sundri's family not only loses their daughter but also are thrown into shame and disgust due to a baseless claim. The misconception of female virginity is the dominant theme in the story. Even a mere allegation can destroy a girl's dignity and take her innocent life. Sundri personifies muted female voices.

Sehba Sarwar's "A Sandstone Past" centres on honour killings and distaste for intercaste marriage. The religious boundaries are mainly structured to favour men, demanding other gender identities to obey for their existence. The couple in the story has decided to live together by discarding the chains of religion, but the family tries to protect honour by killing the bride in a lift. After the murder, the family is scattered to farther regions. However, the ghost of the bride later haunts the entire floor. She frightens the inhabitants of the house with her screams and presence. The shadows of death and the aftermath tragedies to the two families are narrated and transmitted with fear and threat. This story is a scandal among teenage girls as a reminder to adhere to religious rules.

Qaisra Shahraz's "The Jeans" is themed on individual freedom of expression, especially in clothing. As the title indicates, the narrator, a girl who wears jeans, is degraded into a bad character, and as a result, her arranged marriage is called off. Their only allegation is that her crop top exposed her belly while receiving the in-laws and groom. In this story, character assassination is done based on the dress she wore, which is not prescribed by religion. Even the girl under interrogation feels guilty about what she has done because her carelessness or choice made her lose a good alliance and prospect. Society and religion burden or mould women to conform to their expected behaviour.

Fahmida Riaz's "The Daughter of Aayi" visualises a mentally retarded girl who has undergone a series of rapes and later becomes pregnant. Another woman in the story, who has to claim the legal share of her husband, takes this baby and introduces it to the family as her own. Thus, Aayi's daughter is relieved from questions about her absence for the past nine months. Also, the women in the village place her under the Bunyan tree as a divine lady, and people start worshipping her as an idol of purity and innocence. The women, including Aayi, try to conceal the pregnancy as a secret from the men in their family, and they try to save the girl whose mental state is far from the natural world. Her public display in the village's heart helps the women keep an eye on the girl to protect her from the unknown rapist. It maintains her as pure and sacred throughout her life.

Nayyar Rahman's "The Job Application" narrates the hardships of a widow seeking a job for her livelihood. Being detached from her family, the widow struggles to provide a good education for her son and lead a decent life. The lady and the manager on the interview panel create a dramatic scene to reject her application, highlighting her limitations such as widowhood, the responsibility of raising a son, distance from the office to her flat, night travel, and insecurity. She requests them for the job at any cost as she has already been terminated. The dilemma of a lady seeking her identity as a widow and the pressures of society to curtail her choices to be independent is narrated throughout the story."

Feminist Lenses and the Selected Stories

All six stories encompass women from infancy to old age and represent different perceptions of society according to their age. In these stories, the unborn female fetus is not allowed to be born; girls are raped, forced to marry, and fascinated by gossip; mothers are burdened with the safety of their daughters, marrying them off, keeping them safe and virgin; widows strive hard to survive; and older women become shadows of patriarchy due to influence. The narrators and antagonists are women. They talk less or not at all about the men surrounding them. The narrators try to portray the reality of women in present-day Pakistan, whereas the antagonists attempt to execute men's laws or stabilise patriarchal norms. Marriage is the thematic thread of all these stories, whether the women are victims, survivors, or longing for it. Also, the organ of a woman, virginity, love, conception, widowhood, and moral behaviour are linked to women's problems. If you critically examine these six stories' storylines and narrative strategies, it is a kaleidoscopic impression of feminism.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* represents the dichotomy of angelic or demonic female characters during the Victorian period, paralleling the patriarchal notion that women should be either pure and angelic or rebellious and madwomen. As Virginia Woolf names it, the 'killing of the aesthetic ideal' is more powerful, allowing one to acquire the demonic outcast position to revert. In the story "A Sandstone Past", Saritha is unrestricted in her ghostly stories, whereas the widow in "Job Application" is a living ghost for society because she lacks authority. Also, the daughter of Aayi is the self-declared pure angelic form. In contrast, the girl in "The Jeans" wishes to be an obedient, innocent version to fit for an institution like marriage. Similarly, Sundri is pure by nature but impure to society. The mother in "The Breast" is considered demonic for feeding her emotion, but she is corrected by the tribunal by cutting off her breast, a part of her female identity. Sandra and Susan reject the fit-in dichotomy of being demonic or angelic in favour of a realistic, authentic portrayal of female characters. The widow is the realistic character who moves out from the structures, accepts the challenges, and leads her life usually. This interplay of excellent or lousy duality in female characters is purposefully crafted in all these selected stories.

Medusa uses her body part as a tool to attack her enemies, and her robust and self-reflective identity protects her from the harm that surrounds her. Chopping off breasts and becoming deformed is a way to fit the norms. She stands fearlessly to neglect motherly affection, faces the cruel law,

and lets her female child escape by embracing death, and instead, she mentions it as she will get rid of '3 kg of the wad of fat' (Jalil 74). Similarly, the girl in the story "The Jeans" shows her fat belly in an uncomfortable dress at a party as her choice to express herself. However, her desire for prospects ultimately makes her realise she must also fit into the norms by rejecting or ignoring her personal choices. The body of Aayi's daughter was a commodity for pleasure, but the neighbouring women protected her body from harm by attaching sacredness to it. Escape from bodily bondage can sometimes free a person into a more powerful position like Saritha. Similarly, Sundri is the epitome of the purification of the body; for instance, the cultural ceremonies during her marriage prompt her body to be more feasible for gifting her husband, but the charge against her makes her die because of her body. The laughing Medusas in these stories are either limited to the cultural clutches or free themselves through the body.

Simone Beauvoir's analysis of the Virgin Mary claimed that the 'cult of Virgin Mary represented the supreme victory of masculinity' (Quoted in Ann Lee) because her presence advanced men rather than women. They raised a belief system out of her virginity. Also, stories like "The Marriage of Sundri" and "The Daughter of Aayi" are about virginity, either to protect or to destroy. Here, virginity is problematic because Sundri is accused and killed when a woman in the crowd claims she has seen Sundri mingling and playing awkwardly with boys. In contrast, the fellow women protected Aayi's daughter from shame and worshipped her acclaimed purity. In both these stories, women are the guardians and judges of other women's virginity.

The Portrayal of Women's Body

By carefully analysing all these stories, it is evident that they are open accounts of female bodies. As Grosz states, "Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal and more natural than men" (Quoted in Lennon), which means corporeality becomes an essential set of ideas to confront and engage with feminist theory. Such nuances are evident in "The Breast". For instance, the narrator reacts to the tribunal's verdict as "shapeless fat sliced off painlessly" (Jalil 74). For her, breasts are no longer a motherly symbol but a pound of fat. The mother is meant for society as someone who produces and bears boy children only, so they dispose of and kill the women even in marriage. Also, a girl child is allowed to be born only to save the life of a twin boy. The narrator longs to become another Aji in her old age; she accepts the punishment as a corrected perfect form of a woman apt for the male-dominated society. It indicates that her deformed figure and the aftermath of being an outcast from her husband can instigate her to be an Aji figure in the future.

In "The Marriage of Sundri", the entire narration spans the female body, elaborating on menstrual pain, cleansing of the body during the marriage, and the question of virginity. The narrator depicts the female body as a field of pain only, but in the end, when the mob is curious about the allegation, they dishonour her action by killing her body. The voiceless Sundri was charged by the voice woman in the mob only to marry off her daughter to the groom. The commodification of the body is sound in these characters. The judgmental authority declares the body as impure under the misconception of virginity. Saritha has been removed from her body, but her ghostly presence is evident throughout the story. When the agency of one's subjectivity is non-existent, the invisible presence can affect the outer reality. Saritha is such a medium where her absence is present among the readers. The more powerful ghostly figure affirms when the narrator girl has to encounter the ghost. It is also a reminiscence of escaping the body irrespective of gender, class, or sex and taking the mediocre identity to express themselves.

The widow's body is free from agency, and her only bodily thread lasts with her son. The narration about the blue dress she wore on the second day after marriage and again in the interview portrays the changes in her body and the sufferings she had to face. Similarly, the

journey to find the interview spot disturbed her female body and indicated the hard labour she did for survival. During the interview, the tormenting questions turned into a mockery, making her helpless not to accept their statement that she was incapable of the post. Her body also reacted to its aggression with sweat, sighs, and bodily gestures.

Aayi's daughter is the most exploited body among the characters. Her mental illness, inability to absorb reality, and inefficacy to deal with the outside world are utilised and misused by men. When Aayi's daughter started mensurating, women in the village found it their duty to change her pads and maintain track of her periods. Here, the subtle body of this girl functions normally but is prone to danger. The writer's exaltation of her inability into an able goddess figure indicates refiguring through writing.

The prospective young girl in "The Jeans" is affected by the dress she fits into. The small portion of her belly was visible to the visitors, and they judged her moral behaviour. As a result, her parents started injecting guilty feelings into her, so the groom's family expressed their disinterest in marrying her. From this juncture, she started blaming her body for not being gentle or in concord with societal manners. As a representative of the new generation, the girl partially accommodates the cultural traits without knowing she is abiding by negative influences.

In these stories, bodies are narrated and represented as either victimised or victorious. Writers never try to sympathise or empathise with the characters but explicitly portray their situation for readers' interpretation and judgment. Major social threats towards women are addressed within these stories, and wherever the detailed narration of the body is needed, the author explicitly describes it.

The Female Subject and the Language of Woman

Cixous believes that "either woman should acknowledge her body by restating the strength of it in her writing" (Laugh 3). For that, language can be distorted and broken with discontinuity. Almost all the stories are narrated like a tale, in simple language, in a linear plot. In Sehba Sarwar's story, the tree line of two families merely represents her country. She tries to narrate how the family got displaced after the murder. Like the complexities in the story, the narration also switches from past to present. The character of Saritha enters into a real-life character while explaining the mystery of her life.

"The Breast" is the anger and expression of a mother who has to face her punishment within hours. So, the mental trauma and the thoughts that come to her mind are narrated in linear, broken words. To stress the narrator's mood, expressions like 'chopping off a breast', 'the desire to deliver a boy child', and 'injustice against a married woman' are repeatedly mentioned. Sundri's marriage is a meticulous description of pre- and post-wedding days, but the focus is on how the bride is moulded by her fellow woman into the marriage system. The writer removes the dramatic element in this story and states the events realistically.

"The Jeans" is different in its presentation and a little complex in its plot, narration, and storyline. It begins with the discomfort of wearing jeans and how the narrator anxiously states it repeatedly in her account. It is sometimes sarcastic and mocking, and the tension is released by changing the clothes. The language is more reflective and emotional in tone. The widow's narration is a cinematic account, where she cares to explain each scene in detail but never loses the soul of the emotion of the story.

"The Daughter of Aayi" is fictional and dramatic yet realistic in characterisation. The victimisation of rape, women's effort to keep their name safe, and abortion as a choice of one's body are explained through an open account. Still, the melodramatic elements like superstition saved her life from further rape, abortion, and pregnancy can be considered a mockery of the system in which a woman must prove her character. All the characters come to life in these stories

by highlighting their versatile experiences and hardships. In all these, the language channels them to disclose women's lives from different walks of society.

Conclusion

The women in Pakistan were subsumed by the patriarchal system, in which they lacked the freedom to educate, openly express themselves, or assert their individuality. The changes in the education system and the broader reading of religious scripts made them come out of their shells to think about themselves and speak for themselves. These selected short stories represent new currents of expression that dismantle the confluence of the system, religion, and the female body. Islamic feminism emerged to create a space for these women to fictionalise the realities and to disclose the dominations related to gender, sexuality, the body, and women. When they have to speak out against a system while being a part of that system, they have to find more prominent voices to reveal the truth. These women and their expressions in short stories provide a closer look at the women they have encountered.

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