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## Resistance Against Inequality: A Feminist Perspective of Shahraz's "Zemindar's Wife" and "Malay Host"

Sabahat Rafique

Department of English Language and Literature, Gujrat Campus, University of Lahore, Pakistan

### Article Info

\*Corresponding author: S. Rafique  
[sabahatrafique0@gmail.com](mailto:sabahatrafique0@gmail.com)

### Abstract

In Pakistani fiction when we try to apply feminist approach, we realize that female writers reveal the deplorable and pathetic condition of women and their status as second grade citizens who are systematically discriminated and looked down upon. They explain through fiction the place of women, their struggling existence against the dominating patriarchal mind set. The study also reveals how do cultural norms treat them as minority, devoid of basic rights and freedom. The study will focus on the place of women, their efforts against the cultural norms set by the society from centuries. The role of the culture is to let patriarchy oppress the women to the utmost level. The present study means to read two short stories from the book, *A Pair of Jeans* by Shahraz, a diaspora Pakistani writer. The main characters of these stories are women, one story, *Malay Host* is about facing oppression and androcentrism which appears as rigid and cruel while in the second story *Zemindar 's Wife* a new phase of patriarchy is shown, facing challenge and threat of being supreme and unable to accept change in the set structure. At the end on the basis of the conclusion drawn from the study the research reveals that short stories support feminism and produce female characters who react against the subjugation of women as a result of unbending and inflexible framework of patriarchy.

### Keywords:

Pakistani fiction,  
feminism,  
struggling existence,  
patriarchy,  
cultural norms,  
androcentrism.

### Introduction

My focus of research is the changing trends in Pakistani female writing particularly in English fiction. It explores the ways in which female writers have been projecting the issue of women as inferior beings, struggling hard for their rights. Men and women are born either masculine or feminine by nature, but society makes the discrimination. Beauvoir (2010) says that it is not a woman who gets birth rather she gets birth. It is not any biological, physical as well as economic condition which defines the human being as a female in the social set up. It is generally civilization which as a whole explains this intermediary production betwixt the man and the eunuch which is termed as feminine. We observe that all hidden assumptions regarding gender are from the cultural discussions. The social set up has been practicing and supporting patriarchy for so long that it seems natural. Thus, making people to perceive gendering is from common sense so it feels natural as Lorber (1997) expounds that females and males are differentiated in social context with a satisfaction of unequal treatment. This is further explained by Raza (2015) that it is not at all considered important that girls should get education as comparison of boys. Therefore, although one finds that gender is interlinked with so many other unequal statures, yet gender inequality is the most difficult one of those structures as it is the most pervasive one. As a matter of fact, it is this very pervasiveness which guides most people in believing that gendering is something concerning biological and thus it is natural. Through socialization of gender pervasiveness males remain dominant and powerful and keep marginalizing women. Change is indispensable and with the constantly changing world we observe the same in literature. The gradual increase in the education and awareness, scientific realities are gaining limelight particularly related to women is the new approach that is geocentrism, the marks of which are visible in every walk of life along with the literature and writing. Geocentrism has a very dominant focus on women in theory, practice or the advocacy of it. It is a conscious effort of asserting a feminist point of view in social issues. Particularly in literature we observe that it is the prejudiced behavior of society which forces them to give vent to their feelings and have catharsis. If we have a glance at history, we will realize that it is the power of words which brings about great changes.

Thus, women writers of our country have used their skills to highlight the oppression done on women and somehow tried to get them rid of the shackles of social and cultural maltreatment. They use their writings to bring about positive changes in social condition of women. Sunderland (2004) wisely explains that gender consequently contrary to biologic universalism of the title sex thus it emerges as an essential belief for feminism as grasping presupposing inclinations along with differences in place of absolutes. More specifically it transfers the centre of attention from a strict resolution towards the probabilities of unlearning along with relearning which is a refusal to accept the existing system and is a transition on individual as well as social.

My research intends to probe into the fact either Pakistani writer use the feminist approach to highlight the oppression done on women and make their contribution in unlearning of old patriarchal cultural norms and relearning by portraying free, bold and courageous female characters. The framework is taken from Beauvoir (2010). We will observe that female writers of Pakistani fiction are depicting the struggle of women in all sections of society, poor as in *Malay host* and rich as in *Zemindar's wife* who are fighting against all ugly realities which force women to give up and submit in patriarchal friendly society.

They use every possible tactic to protect their superiority that female writers refuse to accept and speak bluntly against all injustices done in bold words. Pakistani fiction in selected short stories of Shahraz from the book, *A pair of jeans* (2013) reflects the process of unlearning and relearning the socio-cultural ideology. The stories are analyzed in the light of feminist theory.

### Research Questions

1. The characters of Shahraz portray that how do female writers project the women as oppressed minority
2. Shahraz's female protagonists throw light on the hidden factors and circumstances under which they are forced to raise their voice for their rights?

### Research Methodology and Framework

There are qualitative and quantitative techniques of research as Hammersley (1992) relates that one can define quantitative techniques simply as representation of data numerically while in literature one finds qualitative approach suitable as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe that the analysis can never be objective rather it is mostly an attempt of interpretation of the researcher. It is taken as the researcher finds his own subjective input in a way interpreting the specific data for the enhancement of quality along with the relevance of the research which is going to be conducted. This research applies qualitative methodology which is going to take the analysis of the text of the selected short stories in the light of feminism. The main objective of the study is that the fiction of the female writers in Pakistan projects women as oppressed minority by patriarchy. The main antagonist is mostly society, culture and mindset. Therefore, the work undertaken by critical academic feminists can be termed as academic activism-raising critical awareness through research and teaching. This research takes its framework from Beauvoir (2010) She can only abolish this inferiority by destroying male superiority (p.849).

This framework takes along with Shahraz's (2013) "A pair of jeans", "Zemindar's Wife" and "Malay Host". The systematic pattern of the research is done as the data is organized for the analysis and interpretation of selected short stories, this involves converting the text into word file and preparing an electronic copy, comparing, proofread and saved. This article is an attempt to inquire Pakistani short stories with reference to feminism. For this purpose, short stories produced by Shahraz's first collection are selected.

### Literature Review

Shamsi (2010) expounds that Pakistani English novel has been the centre of attention on international level whereas Pakistani short stories have been submerged underneath the collaborative term fiction though it seems having a lot of practitioners of migration, accommodation, racial discrimination, cultural identity of that aggressive community. This research focuses on Pakistani short stories and spotlight women's struggle against the camouflaged cultural norms which promote patriarchy. The Muslim world in general and in Pakistan in particular is a traditional patriarchal society which shows great preference for norms and values associated with male dominated ideology. The patriarchal mind set does not only justify unequal treatment of men and women but also proves women as an inferior being. Both the genders are supposed to perform their responsibilities as prescribed by society as women are required to perform household chores while men are mostly bread winners. However, gradually these boundaries are getting blurred as an ample number of women are working as ministers, scientists and in almost every field of life. Despite the diversity of the roles performed by women, property and all other material resources are in favour of men. The birth of a female child saddens parents. The education of the females is not given importance rather she is taken as a burden. These set of cultural practices become a part of normal life and in androcentric societies women themselves play a vital role in asserting the patriarchy.

The contemporary writers like Shahraz makes concerted efforts to depict the female characters, fighting their sufferings, competing their counterparts and rebelling against injustice. Thus, she highlights the struggle which

females undergo in difficult set of circumstances. Pakistani short story writers are the inspiring agents for the feminist movement like the west. It is true that first the West then the East pave the way for emancipation and empowerment of women. They are setting a base for feminism although not enough yet is visible and in this way their literature is contributing to the greater cause.

The selected short stories have been discussed by students but with different perspectives than one chosen for this research as Khoiryah (2019) *Zemindar's wife* through Islamic feminist theory by Amina Wadud. The research expresses woman's struggle in the background of Islamic religion. Octarinanda and Seswita (2020) relate *Zemindar's wife* and the *elopement* as woman's dignity in patriarchal social set up. This research is going to opt for resistance of women against inequality.

### Discussion

The discourse of the short stories shows that the practice of highlighting androcentric ideologies often lead to the awakening of feminist consciousness. This practice automatically enables them to realize their condition and challenge unjustified gender norms and values. The selected stories reflect the age and all its trends in forms of culture and its norms as Iqbal (2022) relates that language is the representation of the consciously made beliefs in forms of ideology while the translator becomes the agent of ideological actions. Shaw (2005) relates it as conflict between the very old as well as new, masculine and feminine, and east along with the west. Feminism or gender resistance stands for challenging and contesting the male dominating social order to show and redefine the position of women through thoughts, words, gestures or actions. We find all such traits in Shahraz's short stories' characters. They openly criticize and condemn conventional image and raise their voices to protest them. Her female characters show variety of ways of rejection of patriarchal norms and use multiple strategies to redefine their positions.

### Textual Analysis

#### **Zemindar's Wife**

Patriarchy shows male dominance, Lindsey (2011) believes that patriarchy seems to be an irrevocable and inescapable fact of our existence. When we observe the social set up it seems that male dominance philosophy has always been gripping the psyche of women. Since it is thoroughly and deeply rooted in the construction of the society, so it establishes itself as an inevitable and inescapable fact. When we think about feminism it is not only about challenging the fundamental social norms but rather trying to prove them wrong as well.

The short stories reveal that the patriarchy gives men the fundamental right of household control. This may involve taking charge of the house and authority of taking every decision. The female resistance is taken as challenging their eternal claim of power and control. Shahraz's *Zemindar's wife* describes such a struggle between zamindar, the landlord and his wife Noor. There is continuous friction between them. Noor is empowered by her strong economic background and voices her opinion in every important issue. She is educated, civilised and conscious of social norms as despite having issues with her husband she remains respectful to him in public, as she can never think of letting him or his *izzat* down.

She is a woman with principles and is determined to stop her husband from spoiling the land of poor villagers for his evil intentions of multiplying his wealth. She is presented as a person with awareness and good consciousness. She keeps following the moves of her husband. When she observes the lawyer, she goes inside his room in his absence and tries to find out the reason of the lawyer's arrival as she is very aware of the devastation *opencast mining* can do for the poor community. She is a God fearing and morally conscientious female figure, clear in her concepts and abrupt in her actions by tearing those papers and is not *repugnant* over her actions. She talks directly and boldly to Zamindar and plainly refuses to compromise on self-respect and reputation of the family earned with hard struggle and from so long.

She refuses to yield to her husband's unquestionable authority. Zamindar is a representative of androcentric society and married her for being a thing of beauty and gets confused over her strong reaction and inwardly acknowledges her beautiful wife as *righteous woman*.

He is a man with strong male chauvinism and believes in his intelligence and decisions as final and unchallengeable. He is a product of a society where woman is supposed to be submissive. He gets very upset when his wife interferes in his malevolent wish of grabbing the poor villager's land. He gets angry and furious over her action of handing over possession papers of land to the poor villagers without his knowledge and permission on Eid. He stares at her with his *exuding aggression*, but she stares into his eyes *calmly* without any fear. The towering zemindar is the part of a system which takes woman as a personal possession. When he observes his wife's attitude, he discards the idea of exercising his authority or any kind of violence despite recalling that his grandfather has been beating his grandmother over *minor issues*. He examines her rebellious behavior and realizes that she will not get *bullied* but rather will not have any second thought in *leaving him*. With all the present scenario he keeps thinking that will it be possible for him to live with such woman who threatens his social as well as *patriarchal order*. He

experiences an intense emotional disturbance when he realizes that she *undermines his authority* and she is trying to *usurp his role as a master*.

Here the female character proves that women are not just a piece of decoration but has the brain as well. They can discriminate between right and wrong and have the strength to make correct decisions.

### Malay Host

When we think about male dominated society, we view violence as essentially male derived. Dworkin (1976) emphasizes that the resistance to it itself must not be violent. However, woman's revolutionary refusal to be a victim does not take care of Dworkin's philosophy. Aziza is not from Pakistani origin, yet her fate is no different from than that of Pakistani women. Her life is made miserable by her brother after the death of their parents. The reactions always vary from the situational point of view. Selected short story *Malay host* provides an example where a woman reacts, uses force and violence to reject traditionally programmed and submissive behavior which seems natural as set by the cultural norms. Mill and Mill (1869) describe that it is very true that generally unnatural is uncustomary for the people and everything which appears usual for the people is natural for them.

In Shahraz's short story the protagonist Aziza is victim of the worst kind of emotional and psychological violence on her. His brother deprives her of not only her share in property but also denies her identity. She does not want to open their house for business purposes, but he does not listen to her. She shows her discomfort by showing *dimmest eyes* and thinking them *intruders*.

The idea of opening the personal house to the public is alien and disliked by the visitor as well as she thinks it as *horrified* experience. The greedy brother does not only finish her privacy by having visitors all the time but acts as the master of the house and treats her as a slave and *commands* her softly. Aziza is shown as a rebellious spirit who does not yield to his authority and openly shows her displeasure and anger. When he asserts her to say goodbye to the guests she responds angrily and refuses to do so and tells him that he will *regret* his refusal. The ultimatum in her reply conveys the idea that she is not the passive kind of person who is going to follow cultural inferiority imposed on her. We find in the short story that it is just not cultural hierarchy of superiority, but the males are used to keep the situations in their advantage and female's disadvantage easily. They are free to exploit them as Abdul Hamat does. She informs the driver that Abdul Hamat is his brother who always *locks up* her mentally retorted husband Ibrahim on visitor's arrival.

She clearly knows that he is the one in command. In Pakistani or Muslim societies as in Malaysia the people consciously or unconsciously train their daughters to accept the patriarchy as an absolute reality and unchallengeable fact. Women are thought to be things to be used, exploited and utilized as Aziza informs driver that her brother *marries off* her to mentally retorted Ibrahim so that he can *have* the house. His brother spoiled her life for his personal lust and gain. At the end of the story her violent resistance conveys a strong message that she is determined not to subject herself to further humiliation and disgrace. Her brother imposes the worst kind of emotional and psychological violence by not only getting her married to a mentally retorted man but keeps black mailing her by putting her husband in lock. She is often seen wiping her cheeks with the corner of her shawl. In a fit of anger and grief she sets the house on fire and calls her brother to have a last look at his *show house*. In a fit of desperation Aziza burns Abdul Hamat's empire into ashes and is labelled as *mad woman* while he himself is responsible for her madness.

She has gone mad because of her own brother, so he deserves to face the consequence of her madness and says he robes her *home, youth, and freedom* and makes them *prisoners of his greed and tyranny* while she burns her empire with just a *blister*. Her reactive and violent reaction transforms her from an oppressed, powerless to comparatively powerful. Thus, she successfully redefines her position from a submissive creature to a daring and courageous soul. Her courage makes her master of her destiny and changes not only for herself but also for her intellectually challenged husband. She proves herself as a woman of substance and earns the freedom for herself as well as for her disabled husband that they are *free* and *she will never* in life let anyone *lock him up* again.

### Conclusion

Ullah (2013) delineates that the ideology about gender is utilised not only for the purpose of justifying unequal dealings of males and females rather it also determines the characters and advantages of both the parties. Shahrz's stories' protagonists show a considerable change from traditional type of female images. Although she shows her characters living in social structure which is altogether based on patriarchal ideology from centuries, however, her female characters strive hard to free themselves from these socio-cultural norms and redefine their proper individual place and reclaim their status. They go through psychological, physical and emotional sufferings which lead to the awakening of their feminist identities and consciousness, the process which enables them to unlearn the old social ideal of feminine behavior and resist against the social and cultural assumptions of patriarchy. However, practicing gender resistance can never be easy in such societies, they may cause serious consequences, since it is taken as a threat to the patriarchal order. Nevertheless, women frequently use this option to achieve the control at least for their basic rights as human being. In this way they are successful in their search of redefining themselves.

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