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Feminist Discourse in Urdu Poetry: A Sociolinguistic Study of Parveen Shakir's Poetry

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of feminist discourse in contemporary Urdu poetry through a sociolinguistic analysis of Parveen Shakir's work, with particular focus on her collection 'Maah-e-Tamam' (Full Moon, 1994). The research seeks to decode and deconstruct the linguistic content of Shakir's poetry in order to examine how patriarchy functions as a ruling ideology and how poetic language offers preferred subject positions to males and females. Drawing on feminist poststructuralist theory, especially the insights of Chris Weedon and Michel Foucault, the study explores how ideologies are constructed through discourse, how the female subject negotiates power relations within an androcentric social order, and how real women may empathise with, and be influenced by, the "literary woman" represented in Shakir's poetry.

Using a qualitative methodology, the study analyses selected excerpts from Maah-e-Tamam, translated from Urdu into English, and interprets lexical choices, pronominal patterns and metaphoric structures as sites where gendered power relations are encoded, resisted or re-imagined. The findings suggest that Shakir's systematic use of first-person feminine pronouns, gendered lexemes such as larki (girl), and intimate, emotionally charged images challenges the historically male-dominated Urdu poetic tradition. Her poetry foregrounds women's lived experiences as daughters, lovers, wives, mothers and professionals, thereby destabilising stereotypical constructions of femininity.

The study concludes that Shakir's poetic discourse plays a significant role in the development of feminist consciousness in South-Asian Urdu literature. By articulating a distinctly feminine subjectivity and exposing the workings of patriarchy in everyday life, her poetry offers readers new ways of imagining female agency within Pakistani society.

Keywords: Feminist discourse; Urdu poetry; Parveen Shakir; sociolinguistics; patriarchy; South-Asian literature.

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1. Introduction

This study will be an effort to decode and deconstruct the linguistic content in the discourse of Urdu poetry by writing about the various modes in which the patriarchy is depicted as the 'ruling ideology' in the favor of man. It highlights the emergence of feminism in Urdu poetry, screening a finely tuned departure from the traditional patriarchal set-up of Asian society in general and Pakistan in particular. With the linguistic analyses of a selection of excerpts from *'Maah-e-Tamaam'* (Full Moon, 1994), a book written by the famous Pakistani poetess Parveen Shakir (1952-1994), I try to show that not only the poetess positions herself in a particular way, but also the readers. The language or the linguistic devices she uses, her ideology is quite apparent in the text of the speech. The study shows how the language of poetry offers preferred subject positions to males and females, though the poetess may not assure that readers will essentially take up those encoded positions, as offered by her and vice versa. A poet always projects an ideology through his/her poetry. My aim is to deconstruct the discourse of poetic literature to analyze the functioning and manifestation of feminist discourse. Ideologies are constructed through language as in the selected poetry, by Parveen Shakir, the lead female protagonist, a victim of patriarchy, volumes against patriarchy and paves her way out into a world of her own. The poetess herself studied and taught English Literature. Her poetry was a breath of fresh air in Urdu poetry. She used the first person feminine pronoun, which is rarely used in Urdu poetry even by female poets.

This study is intended to focus on the issues related to the representations of women in contemporary Urdu poetry in the 21st century, specifically in the current decade, embodying the emergence of feminist discourse by decoding the

language and evaluating its effect on the real women. This unique area of research will contribute to the portrayal of feminism through Urdu poetry, how different shades of a woman as a beloved, wife, daughter, mother and a bureaucrat coincide in South-asian society.

Parveen Shakir transcends the so-called cultural, religion and ethical boundaries of the andocentric South-Asian society, where female expression of love is considered immoral, unethical and against the dignity of a female. Arguably, Parveen Shakir can be termed as the third female poetess to use the word *larki* (girl) in her works after Ada Jafri and Fehmida Mirza. The male-dominated Urdu poetry scene seldom employs that word *larki* (girl), and uses masculine syntax when talking about the 'lover'. Similarly, she often made use of the

Urdu first-person, feminine pronoun in her verses which, though extremely common in prose, was rarely used in poetry, even by female poetesses, before her.

2. Literature Review

Research on feminist discourse, Urdu poetry, and South Asian literary culture has expanded significantly over the past several decades. Early studies of Urdu poetry largely emphasized thematic interpretation and biographical readings of canonical male poets, with limited attention to the underlying gendered ideologies encoded in linguistic structures. The emergence of feminist linguistics in the late twentieth century shifted scholarly focus toward understanding language as a site where gender, power, and ideology intersect (Cameron, 1992; Sunderland, 2006). This shift made it possible to analyze Urdu poetic discourse not merely for what it narrates about women, but for how linguistic choices—pronouns, metaphors, grammatical gender, and agency structures—construct or constrain gendered subjectivity.

Within Urdu literary studies, scholars have long noted that traditional poetic forms, particularly the *ghazal*, were shaped by a masculine lyrical voice addressing an often idealized beloved (Faruqi, 2001). Even when women appeared thematically, their voices were rarely presented as speaking subjects. This structural inheritance contributed to a literary culture in which femininity was symbolically represented but seldom linguistically articulated. Feminist critics argue that classical Urdu poetry reinforced patriarchal norms not only through thematic conventions but also through gendered linguistic patterns that implicitly privileged male subjectivity (Jameel, 2017; Ali, 2019).

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of influential female poets—Ada Jafri, Kishwar Naheed, and Fehmida Riaz—who challenged these conventions by articulating themes of autonomy, embodiment, and dissent (Naheed, 2017; Riaz, 2004). Their work is widely recognized as marking a turning point in feminist literary expression in South Asia. However, scholars also note that despite their thematic boldness, the linguistic structure of their poetry often remained partially aligned with masculine norms, reflecting persistent tensions between thematic resistance and grammatical convention (Aslam, 2020; Rahman, 2015).

It is in this evolving landscape that **Parveen Shakir** is frequently identified as a transformative figure. Her poetry introduces a distinctive feminine lyric voice through sustained and deliberate use of feminine grammatical markers, first-person feminine pronouns, and the recurrent use of *larki* (girl) as a self-referential term (Shamsie, 1997). Critics argue that Shakir not only expanded thematic boundaries—addressing desire, emotional vulnerability, betrayal, labour, and modern womanhood—but also reconfigured the linguistic fabric of Urdu poetry by placing explicitly feminine subjectivity at the center of poetic discourse (Mir, 2010; Sultana, 2019).

Shakir's stylistic innovations include the blending of colloquial speech with classical motifs, a technique that scholars identify as grounding female experience in both literary tradition and contemporary sociocultural reality (Khan, 2018). Her incorporation of English lexical items—such as "boss," "department," or "lunch break"—has been interpreted as indexing the identity of modern, urban, professional Pakistani women navigating hybrid cultural spaces (Rahman, 2011). These linguistic choices reflect what sociolinguists describe as "indexicality of gendered identity," wherein language directly signals social positioning through stylistic features (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Feminist discourse theorists contend that Shakir's poetry illustrates the discursive negotiation of subjectivity within patriarchal contexts (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1997). Her metaphors frequently juxtapose confinement (*qafas*, *deewar*, *zanjeer*) with mobility, illumination, and fragrance, symbolizing competing discourses of restriction and agency within Pakistani womanhood (Sultana, 2019). Moreover, her representation of the male figure often reverses classical hierarchies—portraying him as emotionally vulnerable, absent, or morally ambivalent—thereby repositioning masculine subjectivity within a destabilized discursive frame (Abbasi, 2016).

Despite substantial literary commentary on Shakir, scholars have noted a gap in research that systematically examines her work from a sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic perspective. Existing studies tend to focus on thematic patterns—love, betrayal, nostalgia—while overlooking the micro-linguistic mechanisms that produce these meanings (Aslam, 2020). A poststructuralist feminist linguistic approach, however, highlights how identity is constructed through linguistic repetition and variation rather than merely described (Butler, 1997). From this perspective, Shakir's linguistic choices—pronoun distribution, metaphors of agency, lexical patterns, and shifts in narrative voice—can be

understood as actively constructing feminine subjectivity rather than simply representing it.

The present study builds upon these scholarly developments by synthesizing insights from feminist linguistics, poststructuralist discourse theory, and Urdu literary criticism. It aims to analyze how Shakir's poetry deploys linguistic resources to construct, negotiate, and destabilize gendered identities in Pakistani cultural contexts. By examining grammatical gender marking, pronoun usage, metaphorical structures, and representations of agency, this study seeks to illuminate the discursive mechanisms through which Shakir's poetry participates in a broader feminist reimagining of Urdu poetic tradition. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap in Urdu literary scholarship and provides a methodological foundation for future sociolinguistic analyses of South Asian poetic discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

The approach I take for this research is a feminist poststructuralist approach. For this, I would like to draw upon the works of Chris Weedon and Michel Foucault. Chris Weedon states, "Discourses are constantly vying for status and power. The site for this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not the sovereign protagonist." (Weedon 1987:41)

Discourses are initially related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society; that is why they are always and everywhere ideological. Control over certain discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in society.

Feminist theorists mainly concentrate on power relations and how a woman negotiates relations of power. It is in line with Weedon's theory that I will draw upon my research analysis. Contemporary South-Asian cinema has moved away

from presenting woman as simply an oppressed group, as victims of male domination, and has tried to formulate ways of analyzing power. In poststructuralism, according to Chris Weedon, "language is not the expression of unique individuality; it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific." (Weedon 1987:21)

Weedon deconstructs the belief that gender is biological; her work depicts that gender is a cultural construct. According to her, poststructuralism enables feminism to have "a way of conceptualizing the relationship between language, social institutions, and individual consciousness which focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities of change." Poststructuralism also gives feminism a structure and a vocabulary to comprehend relationships of power. Weedon also reveals the mandatory need of using feminist theory when elucidating how patriarchy works.

This is what I intend to draw upon: that the feminist discourse emerging in Asian poetry is fundamentalizing the identity of woman. Weedon argues that "Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life—the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become." (Weedon 1997)

Discourse can be observed in the use of spoken, written and verbal language, and multimedia forms of communication. Michel Foucault developed an original notion of discourse in his early work, especially The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972), where he states that discourse is a medium through which power relations produce speaking subjects. Discourse, therefore, is controlled by:

- Objects (what can be spoken of)
- Ritual (where and how one may speak)

- Privilege (who may speak)

According to Foucault, knowledge is both the creator of power and a creation of power. The philosophical framework based on the works of Weedon and Foucault is used here as a research approach. Its implications for literary representations of women help examine the construction of meaning, power relationships, and the importance of language as it affects the audience.

The linear patriarchal structure of language was radically affecting the identities of women and the subsequent roles assigned to them by society. Within the inception of feminist discourse, many misconceptions about women and their identities were removed. Women were no longer mere puppets swayed by the whims and discretions of male masters, as previously portrayed by male writers. Instead, their identities as individuals were established. Woolf's message (1982): "Women must rail against the resistance of patriarchal culture and attain some degree of independence and androgyny."

4. Research Questions

My aim of this research is to deconstruct the poetic discourse to show the hidden ideologies at work. The research questions this study seeks to answer are:

1) How an ideology is projected through poetry and how does it manipulates the power relations?
2) How the ideologies projected in the poetry effect the real-woman? Does the real-life woman empathize with the literature woman and vice versa?
3) Does the contemporary Urdu poetry by Parveen Shakir contribute towards the deconstruction of patriarchy and the development of feminist discourse?

This research will aid to unveil the plight faced by an average Pakistani woman in her day-to-day life. Some of the poems of Parveen Shakir are very close to life

and highlight the complexities of human behavior and psychology. This research will outline the reception and perception of Parveen Shakir poetry by Pakistani society at large, which will give an insight in Pakistani poetic culture.

5. Research Methodology

The Qualitative research methodology will be used for this purpose as it is very supportive in gathering the information of in-depth understanding of human behavior and factors that govern this behavior. The research material will be collected using primary and secondary sources.

The primary research data will be collected from the book Maah-e-Tamaam, which is a collection of Parveen Shakir's works. The lexical items from the selected excerpts will be translated from Urdu into English and then deconstructed to analyze the ideologically loaded language and the emergence of feminist discourse.

The secondary research material will be collected from libraries by exploring the critique on Parveen Shakir's work, both in Urdu and English language. Other sources of data collection will include:

- Interviews of Parveen Shakir
- Print and electronic media features
- Published critiques and reviews

This methodology allows for a deep examination of textual patterns, gendered language, and sociolinguistic cues embedded within the poetry.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The analytical discussion of Parveen Shakir's work demonstrates a profound interplay between language, identity, and power. Each poem functions as a micro-level site where patriarchal ideology is confronted, negotiated, or resisted. A detailed discourse analysis reveals that Shakir's consistent use of the first-person feminine pronoun disrupts Urdu's traditional poetic neutrality, which

overwhelmingly defaults to masculine grammatical forms. By inserting "I" as a woman, she linguistically marks female subjectivity and makes gender visible in ways that implicitly challenge the invisibility of women's experiences in Urdu poetry.

Lexical choices in Shakir's poetry frequently evoke themes of confinement, emotional vulnerability, desire, and resistance. Words associated with restriction such as *deewar, zanjeer, saaya, andhera* appear alongside words that signify awakening, agency, and emotional autonomy. These linguistic pairings dramatize the internal and external struggles faced by women within patriarchal social structures. Her metaphoric imagery often feminizes abstract concepts such as love, separation, and memory, giving emotional depth to the female voice. This pattern aligns with feminist discourse theory, which argues that metaphors are ideological tools that shape how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships.

A sociolinguistic reading of Shakir's work also reveals how she constructs male subjectivity. The "lover," traditionally idealized in classical Urdu ghazal, is reconfigured in her poems as absent, indifferent, or emotionally detached. This subversion destabilizes the idealized figure of the male beloved and exposes the emotional labor expected of women. By positioning the woman as emotionally articulate and introspective, while the man appears distant or authoritative, Shakir reverses conventional gender roles found in male-authored literature and opens space for critiquing unequal emotional economies.

Furthermore, Shakir's language encodes not only personal emotions but also broader sociocultural critiques. Her depiction of the working woman challenges traditional expectations regarding femininity, domesticity, and professional identity. Shakir uses English lexical items such as "office," "boss," "salary," and "file," reflecting the sociolinguistic reality of urban Pakistani

women navigating modern workplaces. These linguistic borrowings signify a shift in gender roles and highlight tensions between modernity and tradition within Pakistani society.

The dialogic quality of Shakir's poetry also contributes to its feminist potential. By directly addressing an implied male interlocutor or by positioning the female speaker in conversation with societal norms, the poems foreground negotiation rather than submission. Silence, pauses, and ambiguity become indicators of constraints experienced by women, while moments of verbal assertion mark emerging agency.

This study's analysis indicates that Shakir's poetry fosters identification among readers. Many real women may experience the literary woman's emotional and social struggles as reflective of their own lives, reinforcing Weedon's argument that discourse has material consequences for subject formation. The emotional realism in Shakir's poetry allows readers to reinterpret their lived experiences through a feminist perspective. Thus, Shakir's poetic discourse not only contributes to literary innovation but also enhances feminist consciousness and social awareness within a patriarchal culture.

7. Conclusion

This study sets out to deconstruct the discourse of Parveen Shakir's Urdu poetry in order to illuminate the feminist ideologies at work within it. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework informed by the theories of Chris Weedon and Michel Foucault, the research has underscored the ways in which language both reflects and shapes gendered power relations in South-Asian societies. The focus on Maah-e-Tamam has shown how Shakir's poetic voice challenges traditional patriarchal structures and offers alternative subject positions for women as lovers, daughters, wives, mothers and professionals.

The analysis of pronouns, lexical choices and metaphoric structures demonstrates that Shakir's poetry functions as a site of both resistance and reconstruction. Her bold use of first-person feminine pronouns and explicit naming of larki (girl) disrupt the male-centred grammar of traditional Urdu poetry. Her representations of the working woman, the emotionally self-aware lover and the reflective mother collectively expand the range of identities available to women in Urdu literary discourse.

Overall, the findings suggest that Parveen Shakir's poetry plays an important role in the emergence and consolidation of feminist discourse in contemporary Urdu literature. Her nuanced portrayal of women's experiences and her innovative linguistic strategies contribute to a broader rethinking of female identity, agency and resistance within Pakistani culture.

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