



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v19i1>.

# A Feminist Study Of Sexism In Shahraz's Selected Short Stories

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## Abstract

*Works by Pakistani women are of grave significance in this country's phallogocentric culture, where it is normal for women to be humbled. Qaisra Shahraz's "A Pair of Jeans" and "The Discovery" addresses women's social and cultural representations, which, according to Helen Cixous, queered from a phallogocentric perspective. Textual analysis of Shahraz's selected short stories embedded in the local and diasporic contexts reveals how women's writings are not similar to phallogocentric ones. The role and nature of female characters in the selected stories highlight<sup>1</sup> the 'truths' of women as human beings who are not 'monsters outside the home' or 'angels inside the home' as they are labeled in men's writings. This affirmation of a woman's identity can subvert phallogocentric sexism in the Pakistani context.*

*Keywords: feminism, Pakistan, phallogocentrism, sexism, Shahraz*

## 1. Introduction

This study claims that women's literature is the best suited for the study of women's experiences of othering, which is produced through a binary correspondence between self (man, colonizer) and other (woman, colonized). Women from the fourth world, who come from the lowest socioeconomic strata, have traveled a long way to achieve hegemony. First, they did not exist. Then they became invisible. "Then they're funny. Then they're disgusting" (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 26), but they were not acknowledged at all. This study is concerned with how women's writings from this lowest stratum establish 'women's identity' because women in subaltern societies experience oppression at all societal levels. This study investigates the reasons why literature produced by women from marginalized indigenous communities directed their attention toward women's issues, making women "the symbolic center of their concerns and debates" (Cooke, 2001, p. viii). This study delimits two short stories, "A Pair of Jeans" and "The Discovery", by Qaisra Shahraz to explore women's real independence and empowerment in Pakistani local and diasporic contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) claims that, for men, women are insignificant creatures whom they use for sexual pleasure, and they consider it manly to do so. She argues that “if women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be found on the same principles, and have the same aim” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 27). Virginia Woolf (1935) asserted that women’s participation in literary discursive practices can establish women’s identities: their equal rights, economic independence, and education. Kuizenga (1988), however, argued that, historically, language has always been associated with men; therefore, all the sentences and words are believed to have been constructed by men who had previously established this tradition and rejected all that did not suit them. Therefore, women’s literary discursive practices were never acknowledged. She highlights the long trail of female writers who have written under patriarchal names and styles to express their experiences. These female writers succeeded in conveying female ideas and messages to the texts written in the names of male writers. Therefore, women’s connection to language differs from that of men because women are aware of both feminine and masculine forms and sources of creativity. Kuizenga (1988) argued that female-centered writing is more valid for the patriarchal social order. She asserts that women’s writings can mend the divide between body and mind, subjectivity and objectivity.

Kuizenga’s emphasis is on the negative aspects of phallogocentric writings, which exploit women in every aspect of life and circumstances. She argued that the body of women is circulated in discourses that condemn phallogocentric literature and, in fact, all writings against women as a form of falsehood (Kuizenga, 1997). In contrast, women who write about gender are remarkably honest. They eloquently define the reality of the bitter clashes between women and men. However, Kuizenga, (1997) asserted that this text is not reliable for constructing the identity of a person because, according to Mal (1975), the body constructed in a language can change as the language changes with time. Vintges (1992) explored the origins of language in the female body and argued that women must let themselves be aware of their actual presence instead of living in nostalgia for past suffering. She argued that every woman must think independently because no already prepared model can help women recognize their existence. Therefore, respondents should be aware of the cultural differences that shape the male/female dichotomy and should pay attention to societal norms in relation to their bodies (Vintges, 1992, p. 140). Women must dare to project women’s writing to define their self. However, understanding their literary and non-literary works is neither a comfortable nor a simple proposition because these works define a profound sense of face-to-face humiliation, anger, pain, and recrimination. According to Kuizenga (1988), these works explain various interpretations of crucial circumstances. She stated that if females can regain their natural language, they can also write about themselves in historical texts.

### **3. Research Methodology**

According to Braidotti (1991), the male body has traditionally been considered the human norm; the male gender is the standard against which the difference is measured. Helen Cixous (1975), a French feminist, argued that the female gender is different from the male gender; thus, the female gender became monstrous as a sign of difference, and “there is no place for [woman] because she’s not a he” (p. 45). To counter this phallogocentric binary system, Cixous offers a new approach to understanding and expressing women in their terms and speaks about their liberation from the oppressive patriarchy that alienates women from themselves. Cixous asserts that both phallogocentric and gynocentric writings contribute to the construction of gender through language. She rejects the idea of a male-written female because it does not depict women accurately. Therefore, she insisted that women must write about women and bring them to writing, from which they are driven away as violently as from their bodies. It is through

writing that women's voices are heard, which challenges the phallogentric tradition that has previously imprisoned women in their silence. Cixous (1975) encouraged women to break free from repression by producing narratives that would revolutionize the existing norms. Women are stigmatized in the fields of writing, music, painting and other discursive and non-discursive practices. Their accomplishments in historical context are completely ignored in patriarchal societies. To establish women's identity within a patriarchal society, Cixous argues that the only way to overcome the patriarchal notions of gender politics is to write.

#### **4. Text Analysis**

This study reveals women's aversion to portraying women as monsters or angels rather than flawed human beings. Although not strong nor dominating patriarchal norms, Qaisra Shahraz rejects gender politics. The character of Miriam in the short story "A Pair of Jeans," tries to rebel against patriarchal social boundaries imposed by patriarchy. She adopts a Western style, wears jeans, and "feels different" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 46). Even though she was different and strong, she could not help feeling nervous. On her way home from a party, she was uncomfortable as she "slid off the bus seat and glanced at her watch ... pulled the jacket close to her body, suddenly very self-conscious about her jean-clad legs. ... [h]er heart was now rocking madly against her chest, and the clothes burned her" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 46). The distress and uneasiness of Miriam because of her Western clothes and her forbidden trip to a hill station illustrate the conflict between her inner desires and the fear of a girl who is going against traditional society. Her traditional family background makes her nervous in untraditional outfits. She feels uncomfortable on her way back home because she knows well that the Western style of clothing is not acceptable for her family. She is afraid of her in-laws who are about to reach her home. She walks briskly before their arrival and wants to change her jeans-jacket dress. "[S]he was very conscious of her appearance and hoped that she would not meet anyone she knew" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 46). Her fear of wearing jeans and a short jacket exposed the conflict between the modern West and the traditional East. She becomes the voice of those women who bend to the Western style of living, where they feel more flexible than the Eastern style, which insists on confinement "in the home" or a veil (Wolf, 1989, p. 37).

The story explains the struggle of women to survive their desires. They have to pay the cost for it. Miriam made every effort to get home on time, but she was late. As she walks through the door, she notices her mother-in-law entering as well, looking at her all dressed up in jeans and a short jacket. The prohibited clothes shocked the in-laws, and they immediately questioned the character of the girl they liked. Miriam's mother-in-law, who dresses in shalwar kameez and chador, does not like her because she (Miriam) is not traditionally dressed up like her. Miriam could not bring herself to make eye contact. She noticed the quick, furtive glances directed at her, or rather at her appearance, but not at her as a person: "the appearance she presented clad in a pair of Levis and a skimpy leather jacket to top it off" (Shahraz, 2013 p. 47). Her Mother-in-law looks at her as if she has never seen her before. It is the Western version of Miriam that she dislikes the most because her mother is a man-driven woman. The mindset she displays reflects that of a woman constrained by social norms who is directed on how to exist and resist such an unconventional lifestyle. Both Miriam and her mother-in-law were raised in a society where everything, either good or bad, is specified by the nods of men who are independent in their decisions, whereas women have no permission even to wear the clothes of their choices. Therefore, it is not a big deal for a man to break social boundaries, whereas a woman is declared a monster if she crosses the limits of her patriarchal-defined boundaries. Phallogentric conventions construct women as beautiful and romantic entities that do not have any flaws. Therefore, being members of such social conventions and after seeing her dressed in jeans and a jacket, Miriam's in-laws perceive her as a girl of bad character who may have

other forbidden interests in European life. They immediately decided to break the engagement to save their family's reputation. A young woman faces difficulties solely because of her clothing, which is considered inappropriate in our society.

The inner conflict and worries of Miriam reveal a girl who does not want to follow man-made customs but rather follows an equality-made tradition. She wants to defend herself by saying that only her clothes are changed, and she is the same girl her in-laws selected for their son. However, no one bothers about her argument. They only believe in the facts they have seen. Miriam tries to manage the situation and immediately wears the traditional dress. Dressed in elegant, long tunic and loose trousers, she descended the stairs. A long dupatta scarf surrounded her shoulders. She embodied a role that her future in-laws would favor. "A role of a demure and elegant bride and daughter-in-law – dressed modestly, with her body properly covered" (Shahraz, 2013 p. 49). This shows that patriarchal social rules are more important than the liking and disliking of a person. A girl who is innocent and does nothing wrong suffers only because of social restrictions. The sole basis for her in-laws' judgment was her clothing, which was completely unjust and illogical. She is declared characterless because of her choice to wear untraditional clothes. She bears all these acts of injustice because she is a woman; a weak, timid, and powerless woman who cannot stand up against social norms. After wearing traditional clothes, Miriam is at ease, relaxed, and secure when encountering her in-laws. Her in-laws' remarks describe the patriarchal social order: "So, how do you feel about your prospective daughter-in-law? I believe you informed me that she was a very modest girl, a very "sharif." Would you consider that bare waist modest?" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 53). The conversation depicts the resentful truths of Pakistani society, where women must fulfill phallogocentric desires because being female, they have no power to take steps against social restrictions. Miriam's in-laws were embarrassed because she wore jeans and did not want to introduce her to their relatives because of her untraditional lifestyle. For them, her outer appearance was more important than her inner personality, and they thought that this type of girl who wears jeans and a short jacket cannot take care of marital duties and household responsibilities. They also thought that this type of modern girl makes her husband puppets in their hands; therefore, they did not want to lose their son. Miriam's mother Fatima was very embarrassed and afraid of her future. Miriam was scolded by her for not following her instructions and was informed that her "engagement had to be broken off!" Miriam paled. Her heart had sunk into the pit of her stomach. "Why, Mother?" she asked calmly. She was amazed at how her mind was functioning, although a buzzing sound seemed to hammer in her head" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 60). Her only fault was that she wore Western dress, which is not allowed in her society. By doing this, she gets rejections from her in-laws because they want a typical traditional daughter-in-law who can run their household duties. However, when they saw Miriam wearing a pair of jeans, they changed their mind and decided to reject her. Miriam ran upstairs to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Standing in the middle of the room, she breathed deeply. "Why was it she was never heard of before? "Not to marry Farook?" Miriam voiced loudly" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 60). Before wearing that piece of clothing, Miriam did not know its aftereffects, and she had no idea that a pair of jeans could cause such a disaster in her life. It was not a pair of jeans that ruined Miriam's life but social restrictions. Being a woman, she cannot do anything for herself and she has to face all these circumstances, which are unfortunately created by a pair of jeans in her life.

Fatima, Miriam's mother, is another female character in the story who demonstrates Pakistani womanhood in a traditional patriarchal social order. She is not a typical old-fashioned mother and has never imposed too many limitations on her daughter. However, she knows well the need for a check and balance, but this check and balance does not mean suppressing the freedom of her girl-child. "Normally she wouldn't have batted an eyelid if her daughter had

turned up at her door at 11 p.m., as long as she knew where she was and with whom and at what time she was returning home” (Shahraz, 2013, p. 48). However, she is also socially restricted and feels embarrassed to see her daughter in jeans and a jacket in front of her in-laws. Being a part of a patriarchal constructed society, she has to follow all its boundaries. The situation shows a conflict between a women-desired society in which women can choose their lives according to their own choices and a men-constructed society in which even untraditional clothes can create trouble for women. Being dependent on men, he/she has no right to promote her own choice of living. She must fulfill all the demands that the patriarchal society expects from her. When Fatima opened the door to her expected guests “she saw her daughter hovering behind [them]” (Shahraz, 2013, p. 47). The moderate mother is in shock because she is now facing the dual superior pressure of patriarchal society and her daughter’s in-laws.

In “The Discovery”, Shahraz describes the insincerity and hypocrisy of society toward women and how women are socially bounded and restricted in their acts, and men are free and independent. A woman suffers because of her gender, and she is supposed to be timid and weak in her decisions, whereas men have strong willpower to make decisions; whatever they do, it will be acceptable in our society. A man can do anything he wants, whether good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, or legal or illegal. This study discusses this unfair attitude of society through Rubiya’s character in “The Discovery”. The story describes Rubiya’s relationship with her husband Jamil and explains how the mistakes of a woman are not forgiven in a male-dominated society. Jamil knew how to treat his wife well and often went out of his way to make her happy. However, his patriarchal mindset led him to believe that he was superior in various aspects. To please his wife, Jamil decided to clean an additional part of their bedroom, which Rubiya had frequently asked him to do. It was a small room that they planned for their coming child, so they set it up as a baby’s room. He decided to clean this room to surprise his wife. He vacuumed different parts of his home in the morning and then cleaned the bathroom in the afternoon. His work shows that he does not feel shy about household chores with his wife and believes in the equality of their relationship. While working, he continuously smiled, imagining how his wife was happy with his work. He just imagined the happy face of his wife. The description of his character explains how loving and caring husband he is, who is doing household activities to make his wife happy. Shahraz depicts his character as quite different from typical husbands. He cleans one of the small rooms of his house for their new baby. His wife is not at home, so he wants to surprise her by cleaning the room in her absence. There is no purpose behind this activity; he only wants to make his wife happy. He not only cleans the room but also cooks food for her. While cleaning the waste, he finds a piece of paper in his wife’s writing. In which she wrote something about her ex-lover. His thoughts and expressions changed suddenly after he found that piece of paper. “Jamil threw the paper back in the bag as if it had burned him, and he stood up, his face set and his eyes glaring out of the window. He bent down and lifted the bag. Taking the piece of paper he’d just thrown in, he kicked the bag aside and left the room” (Shahraz, 2013, p. 128). His mind steams up and infuriates like a typical traditional husband, and he makes sudden decisions without asking for anything from his wife, who is completely unaware of what has happened in her absence; a disaster that has destroyed her entire life. The framed picture of him and Rubiya as Bride and Bridegroom, "Dhullan" and "Dhulla", on the dressing table immediately grabbed his attention. Purposefully, Jamil makes his way to the dressing table and throws the picture onto the floor. Rubiya’s radiant, jewel-clad face is staring back at him. Turning away, he headed to the window and gazed out into space, completely oblivious to the green open field in front of him. Quietly, he swore under his breath, and he was seen with anger. It was unbelievable to think that he had spent the entire day cleaning the house to please her. “The filthy hussy” - the words came out again under his suppressed breath” (Shahraz, 2013, p. 129).

In his jealousy, Jamil thought about many negative things about the character of his wife. When the front door opened, Rubiya looked at the ceiling. He did not leave his place and did not show any excitement, as he often did on her arrival. But now he was looking at her through the eyes of a strange man. This thought offended him. "God knew, how many men she had attracted with her looks, looks which nauseated him at the moment" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 130). After learning the bitter truth about his wife, his mind suddenly changed. After this discovery, his behavior changed completely. When Rubiya came back home, he did not greet her as he normally would, and she also felt something unusual in his attitude; however, she did not ask him any questions. Jamil's thoughts changed regarding his wife; he forgets that he loves her and admires her good looks, but instead of that, he puts angry and hateful sight on her beautiful facial features, which attracted him a lot before the incident. His mind was filled with many negative thoughts about her. She is accused and is held guilty of that mistake, which is allowed for men but not for women. She has to endure all the problems because she is a woman. This shows that traditional society is not based on equality between men and women. There is a huge difference between the rights of men and women according to social rules, and there is also more elasticity and acceptance for men but not for women. She is socially bound and restricted and can only do the things that are acceptable by society, which makes her a complete and perfect woman. Her husband, who has spent quality time with her, is declaring her guilty without giving her even a single chance to defend herself. According to social rules, if a woman has connections with someone in the past, it means she is not sincere with her husband and is considered a characterless woman. If a man makes the same mistake, it does not matter much because he is not socially constrained and is free and independent in his life to do whatever he wants. The piece of paper was taken out by him and casually dropped on her chest with a flick. He wanted to wipe off from her face the confident, self-assured smile. Rubiya shook her eyes, lifted her elbows, and retrieved the paper. When Jamil identified the paper and saw the words written on it, her smile disappeared from his face, just as Jamil had expected. The words she had written "five years ago, stared back at her. She froze. She was living a nightmare" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 130). She dreads it badly and loses her confidence and courage. Her smile suddenly vanished. A woman experiences such societal pressure, which leaves her uneasy, perplexed, and unsure of how to handle the situation. Being female, she finds herself helpless and weak because this patriarchal society does not allow her to do what she has done. She tries to explain to her husband that it was her teenage mistake and that she is sincere and honest, but he does not trust her. The mistake that she made in immaturity is not acceptable in society. Jamil had already exited the room, slamming the door as he left. Rubiya slumped onto the bed and shielded her eyes with her hand. What had been supposed to be a happy evening had turned into a nightmare. Oh God, he was aware of it. For two years, she had done everything she could to conceal that foolish, terrible secret from her. And now it was out in the open. She had always envisioned Jamil feeling horrified and disgusted, but somehow, now that he had known, it had felt much worse. The look in his eyes stayed with her. He stared at her, as if she was some kind of hideous creature. She did not like that. "She'd never seen it before. Unlike so many couples, they had an equal relationship" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 132).

Rubiya was extremely hurt after her husband's reaction. She did not want to make him sad, so she tried her best to hide that cheap, nasty secret from him. She does her best to make her husband happy, but his reaction is very awkward and unexpected. He hates her and does not want to look at her beautiful face, which he had adored before opening that secret. He was a good and cooperative husband, unlike many typical husbands. He treated his wife equally and loved her beautiful sculptured features. However, when he learns about Rubiya's past relationship, all his feelings suddenly disappear and are replaced with hate and disgust. She wants to explain to him that she committed that mistake when she was young and immature, but he does not need any explanation. She wants to put all her efforts into saving her marriage

and even lets herself down in front of her husband. Rubiya was preparing dinner for the following evening, while Jamil was not home. He had not informed her of his whereabouts, and she refrained from asking because of his previous sarcastic comment. His hurtful remark deeply stung her, but she did not let it affect her. She realized it was neither her concern nor her focus. "She hated the image he created of her in his mind, as a soiled wife, an image in which he had lost both respect and trust" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 133). When she asks him, where are you going? He rudely replied. He sarcastically attempts to make her realize that he is not like her and will not go anywhere with someone else. His sardonic tone and bitter words hurt her. When she explains everything to him, he does not answer well and acts as though all her words are meaningless to him. This shows that a so-called piece of paper suddenly changes an individual's mind, thoughts, and feelings. After watching his cold behavior, Rubiya thinks he hates her because he knows her fault, but she is the same person he loves. Not only did his feelings change, but his point of view about his wife also changed. There is now no trust or respect in their relationship. Her day at work was hampered by what had happened the previous evening. Her mind buzzed over the remarks she could make to defend herself in the event of a situation. But the situation did not emerge. He was not there when she got home. She waited patiently, prepared the dinner, and then ate it herself. It was a psychological torture. No person has the right to dominate another in such a way. The situation had revolted her. If Jamil stayed in this mood and taunted her whenever it suited him, she would always be a silent sufferer, taking the brunt of his anger and unable to express herself. No! She was not going to go through that again. She had too much pride. She was not made to be smothered under someone else's feet. She had already been smothered enough. She was not going to relive the nightmare of three previous years spent with her parents. There she was made to suffer for her deeds daily. Her mother, who never forgave her for what she had done or what she had made them experience during those two fatal days, "made her a perpetual scapegoat for her anger" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 134).

The sufferings and pains of Rubiya's life have made her mentally upset because of her husband's attitude. He does not care about her and spends most of his time outside the home to avoid her. She makes dinner for him, but he does not return home, and his attitude makes Rubiya sad. She is tackling this painful, critical situation to save her marriage. Shahraz narrates that Rubiya wants to save her marriage but her husband does not bother to accept her efforts to save their relationship. She is suffering because she is a woman, and all her marital duties and responsibilities are up to her. Unlike the typical traditional wives who put all their efforts for the sake of their marriages; she makes a different, unusual decision because she does not want to make herself a puppet in the hands of Jamil. She is also a human being, and she has equal rights to express her will. She recalled that her parents had already mistreated her because of a previous mistake and that they no longer trusted her. Her spouse is acting similarly. Her husband or parents are not faulty; society does not give equal rights to women. Women are always silent sufferers, and society does not allow them to commit even minor mistakes. They are socially bound, compelled, and suffocated. Throughout three years, she witnessed her usual cheerful nature being suppressed by her mother's oppressive behavior and the submissive role she was compelled to play. A disturbing image had crossed her mind, envisioning herself enduring the same three years, but this time with her husband. A shiver ran through her spine. She had cared for her husband and was committed to preserving their marriage; there was no question about that. However, she was not willing to sacrifice her mental well-being and emotional stability. "She was not born to receive her husband's taunts for the rest of her life, for a supposed crime. Life could not be so unfair" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 134).

Shahraz introduces a strong and confident Rubiya who can overcome all social restrictions. Unlike other women, she does not want to spend her whole life in her husband's



home, where she lacks respect and trust. She loves her husband and wants to save her marriage. However, she cannot do this for the price of her self-respect and emotions. She decides not to compromise and follow such social restrictions. She cannot carry the burden of an unsuccessful relationship and cannot bear the punishment for the crime that she did not commit. She mechanically donned her coat and grabbed her handbag, leaving everything untouched as she descended the stairs. Unsure of her next steps, she was certain about one thing: she would not spend the night at home. Mentally preparing for her parents' inevitable response to her departure from her house, her husband, and her marriage, she hailed a taxi. "When asked where she was bound, "A turn round the whole city", she replied. The night, and its accompanying darkness, did not bother her" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 135). Rubiya's actions explains her decision to leave her husband's home for the rest of her life. Before leaving the house, she only takes her handbag and nothing else to prove herself in front of the society. She does not want to live in her parents' home and does not want to make herself an unwanted burden for her parents; therefore, she chooses to make her own home individually where she can live freely and independently. Unlike other women who suffer this situation, she is not bothered about her upcoming baby. She is a courageous woman who can give her child a better future without any support from her husband. The female character portrayed by Shahraz defies all societal norms and expectations to live her life in a community. She does not need any support from her parents or husband for her survival in society. She built an example for women who spoil their lives because of patriarchal social restrictions. Rubiya also knows that her decision to move to a separate house is not acceptable in society, but she does not care. After leaving home, she rents a taxi to go to her parents' home, her temporary destination. She will make her own home. On her way to her parents' house at night, she is relaxed and confident and has no fear of being alone in the darkness.

## 5. Conclusion

"Women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attention, which men think it manly to pay it for sex, when, in fact, men are insultingly supporting their superiority" (Wollstonecraft, 1792, p. 62). This controversy concerning gender differences describes the inferior position of women as the "sexually other" (Elbert, 2017, p. 88). In this regard, cultural, economic, and political movements for women's legal protection and equal rights help women understand the social and political perceptions and patriarchal logic behind gender distinctions. Qaisra Shahraz's arguments of how economic freedom and education make Pakistani women wise enough to understand their fundamental rights focuses on the fact that Pakistani women must be free in their choices, as Pakistani men are, and should not be considered as ornaments. Consequently, Pakistani women's writings must discuss Pakistani women's suffering in patriarchal societies and encourage women to resolve their issues.

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