Internalized Sexism And Androcentric Ideologies: A Critical Study Of Uzma Aslam Khan's Novels

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the issue of internalized sexism in The Story of Noble Rot (2001) and Geometry of God (2009) by Uzma Aslam Khan. It identifies the linguistic tools used by certain characters in the selected discourses (novels) to endorse gender discrimination. The current study utilizes feminist critical discourse views as conceptual framework, and critical stylistics as methodical framework to provide a feminist political critique of the selected discourses. A feminist critical analysis of the selected novels highlights that linguistic tools, such as choice of nouns, choice of verbs, equating and contrasting, prioritizing, assuming, modality, negation, direct and indirect speech, deictic elements and speech acts, are used by various older female characters to reinforce androcentric ideologies on younger female characters. Language is used as a tool to devalue their work, trap them in marriages, abuse their power in relationships, deny their authority to make decisions and maintain hierarchy over them in all situations.

Keywords: *Internalized Sexism, Feminist Critical Discourse Views, Critical Stylistics.*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Uzma Aslam Khan is a Pakistani writer in English. Her novels are written in Pakistani contexts and are focused on highlighting socio-political issues that exist in Pakistani society. Her novels have been explored from various standpoints. Rakshit et al. (2023, p. 1) examined how Thinner than Skin (2012) by Uzma Aslam Khan revives "the sense of place, particularly the place sense redefined by the experiences of post-colonial, eco-social catastrophes, as [1]a dialogical co-habitation of human-non-human environment in mainstream academia." Their work argues that the novel uses a 'post-colonial eco-cosmopolitan' approach in highlighting the fluidity of place-based identities during times of crisis and turmoil.

Ishfaq et al. (2021) carried out a Marxist analysis of The Story of Noble Rot (2001) by Uzma Aslam Khan. Their study justifies that those, ruling capitalism, are forcing the working class to sell their labor-power to them. In return, the workers are getting less daily wages which makes them unable to meet their families' basic needs (Ishfaq et al., 2021). Another researcher, Irum (2020), focuses on the novels of Uzma Aslam Khan from an environmental perspective in her doctoral dissertation. Her study identifies the ways "the 'state' engages with the ecopolitical discourses and the negative environmental and resultant social health in the

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Pakistani society through studying the intersections of western imperialism, militarism, state policies, capitalism, consumerism, global climate change and indigenous communities" (p. 4). According to her, Khan's novels are an attempt to promote values of environmental movement among Pakistanis. They bring awareness to the importance of having strong ecological consciousness (Irum, 2020).

The present study focuses on the issue of internalized sexism in the selected novels of Uzma Aslam Khan. Sexism refers to the assumption that one sex (i.e., male) is superior to another sex (i.e., female). The term also means stereotyping and assigning social roles based on sex. "Misogyny can be argued to be a more entrenched and violent expression of sexism. Both are enmeshed within, and a necessary condition of patriarchy" (Savigny, 2020). Feigt et al. (2020, p. 216) highlight that "covert sexism and internalized oppression, issues that women have been experiencing for centuries, are still occurring in the lives of women today." According to Bearman et al. (2009, p. 10), internalized sexism "occurs when women enact learned sexist behaviors upon themselves and other women." Their research reveals that internalized sexism takes everyday forms. They argue that most girls are channelled away from traditionally male dominated fields, and are pushed towards gender normative fields. Girls learn not to trust their capabilities. On the one hand, they are made to believe that they need protection, and on the other hand, they are expected to take care of their families (Bearman et al., 2009). They do not find female role models in fields of interest. They are often criticized when they are assertive or outspoken, and are usually disliked as leaders. They are expected to spend time and money on physical features, and are valued primarily for their looks and sexualities. The researchers highlight that whether sexist practices are intentional or unintentional, they have pervasive effects on the identities of women. They affect their life choices. The researchers also argue that these practices are circulated among women even in the absence of men (Bearman et al., 2009).

Han and Lee (2023, p. 214) write that "subtle presence of gender stereotypes, role expectation, and objectification is constantly retained and reproduced by people of all genders. In other words, sexism can be learned and internalized by women who then turn around to enact sexist behaviors on other women and themselves." The researchers emphasize that internalized sexism, as a coherent framework for understanding experiences of women, needs further research. Lakoff's work, Language and Woman's Place (1975), is considered to be a starting point of gender and language studies. According to her, the subjugation of women is highlighted in ways they are expected to speak and the ways in which they are spoken of (Lakoff, 1975, p. 45). Tannen (1990) argues that women are taught to speak a language of intimacy and connection while men are taught to speak a language of independence and status. Eckert (1992, p. 2) believes that the problem is that "we view language and gender as self-contained and independent phenomena, we miss the social and cognitive significance of interactions between them." Similarly, Cameron (2005) highlights that masculinities and femininities are formed in specific communities with respect to local social arrangements. Hence, the same patterns cannot be found universally.

Conceptual Framework

Traditional feminist theories, often used to analyze feminist issues in discourses, ignore the intersection of gender with other systems of oppression. Therefore, the current study uses feminist critical discourse views of M. M. Lazar (2005) as conceptual framework to explore the issue of internalized sexism in the selected texts. The use of such views is important for understanding how power works in discourse to maintain gendered social order. Azzopardi (2022) highlights that feminist discursive critique helps in promoting discussion, resistance, and transformation.

Lazar's (2005) work is the first book that discusses the use of a feminist critical discourse analysis as a feminist approach to gender studies. She highlights that feminist CDA forms the centre of CDA and feminist studies, as it aims to explore the complex workings of gender, power, and identity in discourses. Feminist critical discourse analysis critically examines the different cultural and institutional contexts in which "taken-for-granted social assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, negotiated and challenged" (Lazar, 2005, pp. 1-2). She discusses how certain behaviours, which are not according to gendered expectations, may result in sustaining the existing gender system that supports male domination. Furthermore, she argues that gender ideology is hegemonic in the sense that it seems normal, natural, and hence, acceptable to all. According to her, "gender may not be the most important aspect in a particular instance, it is in the majority of cases. This accounts for the pervasiveness of tact androcentrism in many organizational cultures, in which not only men but also frequently women are complicit" (Lazar, 2005, p. 8).

Several researchers have used Lazar's (2005) feminist critical discourse views to explore the issues of gender discrimination and empowerment. Nartey (2021) carried out a feminist critical discourse analysis of Ghanaian feminist blogs. Her work focuses on the resistance strategies used by authors of blogposts "to criticize systematic gendering of privilege and inequality, and to foreground the voice and agency of Ghanaian/African women" (Nartey, 2021, p. 657). Some of the resistance strategies she identified in her work are critiquing patriarchy, resisting gender stereotypes, and calling out sexist attitudes. She argues that "these strategies contribute to a feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations aimed at effecting social emancipation and transformation" (Nartey, 2021, p. 657).

Another researcher, Dalton (2019), carried out a feminist critical discourse analysis of patterns of sexual harassment in Japanese media and political world. She found that "this pattern occurs within a cultural context that discourages speaking out about individual grievances - a particularly noxious cultural norm for women in patriarchal society" (Dalton, 2019, p. 76). She states that while private institutes and universities put a lot of efforts in training their employees in sexual harassment prevention, bureaucrats at ministry of finance lack similar awareness.

Methodological Framework

The present study is qualitative in nature. As qualitative research, it gives importance to subjective interpretation. Qualitative research study is carried out "to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions" (Pathak et al., 2013, p. 1). The study critically analyzes novels by Uzma Aslam Khan, a Pakistani writer in English. As the researchers themselves are Pakistanis, they have a cultural association with the issues under discussion.

In this study, relevant passages have been chosen through skimming, scanning, close and critical reading of the selected novels. The researchers have focused on those passages/lines which embody feminist critical discourse construct. The objective of the study is to explore the issue of internalized sexism as highlighted in the selected discourses (novels) by Uzma Aslam Khan. To critically analyze the selected passages of the novels, this study utilizes tools of critical stylistics as given by Lesley Jeffries (2010). Critical stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics that is primarily based on the works of Lesley Jeffries (2010). It introduces a set of tools which are more inclusive. According to her, the main objectives of critical stylistics are to provide a more complete set of tools, to understand how to study the power of written and spoken texts and to provide details of the ways in which readers might be affected by the text's ideological structure (Jeffries, 2010).

The study utilizes eleven critical stylistic tools. The tool of naming and describing explores how English texts name the world, rather than exploring how English language names the world. The tool of representing actions/events/states emphasizes that the verbal element of a sentence or clause also known as predicator is where actions and processes between nouns or entities are highlighted. Since a writer has the power to choose the words as he/she desires, he/she will also use the type of lexical verb that suits him/her. The tool of equating and contrasting focuses on how texts create new synonyms and antonyms, sometimes, creating synonymy and antonymy between unrelated words out of the context. Exemplification is made open with phrases, like 'for instance,' 'for example,' and 'to exemplify,' unlike enumeration which does not use such phrases. The tool of prioritizing focuses on the possibilities of prioritizing textual information, building upon structure of knowledge, subordination, and transformational options in English. Similarly, the tool of implying and assuming is related to pragmatics which deals with what is implicit in the text.

The tool of negating has narrative and ideological significance. Many people's conversations consist of details of non-existent versions of world which they create for several reasons. They imagine a world they wish existed and enhance the details by adding things that are absent from it, but wish they were present (Jeffries, 2010). The tool of hypothesizing deals with the hypothetical situations that are introduced by modality. It deals with how "texts in fact reflect the speaker's or writer's view of how the world is or might be, how it ought to be or how they wish it was" (Jeffries, 2010, p. 114). The tool of presenting other's speech and thoughts deals with how the narrating voice of the text mediates the words and thoughts of the participants of the text. The tool of representing time, space and society deals with the textual processes through which time and space are presented to create a text world. Similarly, the core of pragmatics lies in speech acts theory. It is a tool that helps to distinguish between meaningful utterances and meaningless utterances, and helps in understanding what is true and what is false. Since people perform different actions using words, when utterances are created, a particular act is performed which is called a speech act.

The suitability of critical stylistics to the present study is justified in many ways. It involves the use of an amalgamation of various tools and views borrowed from M. Halliday's textual analysis (1971), Paul Simpson's stylistics (1993) and Norman Fairclough's CDA (1989). Previously, several researchers have utilized Jeffries' critical stylistics in the study of novels. Khadum and Kareem (2023) applied Jeffries' critical stylistics to the study of Sula (1973) by Toni Morrison. Their study examines the exploitation of linguistic resources in the construction of certain ideologies. Similarly, Sallomi and Obied (2024) have carried out a critical stylistic analysis of The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker in their research study. They found that "women's victimization is recognized in The Color Purple through various syntactic triggers that symbolize Jeffries' conceptual tools" (Sallomi & Obied, 2024, p. 98). Their study concludes that among the conceptual tools provided by Jeffries, the tool of 'representing actions/states/events' is the most common among others as it is interconnected with the violent acts that lead to victimization of women in the novel (Sallomi & Obied, 2024).

Analysis of Uzma Aslam Khan's Novels

Passage I

The first passage has been taken from chapter five of the novel, The Story of Noble Rot (2001), by Uzma Aslam Khan. The lines are a monologue of Mrs. Masood's grandmother. The lines are related to the context where Mr. Masood while hunting birds in Cholistan develops interest in Mrs. Masood (then Hinna), and asks for her hand from her grandmother, offering a high

price for dowry. Before the wedding, Mrs. Masood is advised by her grandmother to play the role of a good wife, and to always obey her husband. Analysis of the selected discourse helps in exploring the issue of internalized sexism. It also identifies the linguistic tools used by female characters to promote androcentric ideologies. The sentences in the passage have been numbered for the ease of analysis and reference.

> [1] "On the afternoon before the wedding, while Hinna was being rubbed with wheat to soften her skin, the old woman counseled her. [2] 'Evil frequents those who defy their roles in life. [3] Men are weak when they aim below their means, women when they aim above. [4] My father fell prey to the churail because he walked backwards. [5] He followed a woman. [6] But to be a good wife, you must always follow at your husband's heel, so he knows where you are" (Khan, 2001, p. 35).

Identification and Labeling of Critical Stylistic Tools

1. **Naming and Describing**: Choice of nouns/referencing ("wheat," "evil," "means," "churail (witch)," "woman," "heel"), noun modification, i.e., pre-modifiers and post-modifiers ("old," "good")
2. **Representing Actions/Events/States**: Material action intentional ("rubbed," "walked"), material action supervention ("fell"), mental cognition ("knows"), verbalization (" . . . the old woman counseled her")
3. **Equating and Contrasting**: Metaphorical equivalence ("My father fell prey to the churail . . . ")
4. **Prioritizing**: Passive transformation: (" . . . while Hinna was being rubbed with wheat to soften her skin, the old woman counseled her")
5. **Hypothesizing**: Deontic modality ("must")
6. **Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants:** Narrator's report of speech act (" . . . while Hinna was being rubbed with wheat to soften her skin, the old woman counseled her"), direct speech ("Evil frequents those who defy their roles in life")
7. **Representing Time, Space and Society**: Deixis of place ("below," "above"), deixis of person ("he," "you"), deixis of time ("before")
8. **Speech Acts**: Directives (" . . . the old woman counseled her", "But to be a good wife, you must always follow at your husband's heel . . . ")

Critical Stylistic Analysis

In sentence 1 of the selected passage, the novelist uses the noun phrase 'old woman' to refer to Hinna's grandmother. The expanded noun phrase ('old woman') provides more information about the noun ('woman'). The naming device is not only used by the novelist to refer to a certain entity, but to indicate that the woman (unlike young women) has years of experience in different matters. In sentence 2, Hinna's grandmother uses the word 'evil' (naming device) to instill fear in Hinna's mind for going against the norms of the society. Her grandmother believes that society dictates that women must perform the gender roles assigned to them. In this case, Hinna is advised to obey her husband. Patriarchal society of Pakistan expects men to aim higher than their 'means' (naming device). In contrast, women are not expected to have higher goals in life. They are expected to be happy and grateful, whatever the circumstances. The same is reinforced by older women of the family, including mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, to young brides. According to them, a wife can only be labeled as 'good' (pre-modifier) if she follows the commands of her husband, not vice versa. The use of deontic modality ('must') in sentence 6 of the selected passage highlights that Hinna is expected to follow her husband's will and desires.

The use of material actions in the selected passage shows the novelist's purpose of presenting a particular situation. The MAI 'rubbed' in sentence 1 refers to the different beauty rituals which brides-to-be follow before marriage. One of them is rubbing face and arms with wheat and turmeric to soften and whiten skin. Sentence 1 is a direct criticism of Pakistani society, which suffers from 'gora complex' and has adopted the beauty standards popularized during colonial rule over Indian subcontinent, when beauty was equated with fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes, attributes that are genetically rare among Pakistani women. Additionally, the use of passive transformation ('was being rubbed') in sentence 1 allows the actor in this MAI to be erased.

In sentence 4, through MAS ('fell'), Hinna's grandmother narrates how her father was bewitched by a 'churail' (witch). Here, it is important to note that she does not use the word 'follow', rather prefers to use the phrase 'fell prey' to refer to the incident. Hence, she shares her point of view that for a Pakistani man, he did something unusual. In Pakistani society, men are supposed to be followed by women and not the other way around. The underlying ideology is that men face downfall whenever they follow women. In sentence 5, she further highlights that he was hunted by the 'churail' because he followed a woman. The use of metaphorical equivalence of a 'churail' to a 'woman' in sentence 4 of the selected passage is important. Though the two words are not synonymous, yet it is pertinent to note that texts have the capacity to set up new relationships between words and phrases. Here, a new kind of equivalence is created to refer to the common belief that a man would never follow a woman unless some unholy magic is involved. According to the text producer, Hinna's great grandfather fell in love with a 'churail', therefore she describes it as being the woman's fault for being a predator, hunting her prey. This stereotype of an evil woman or a 'churail' (witch) is common in Pakistani society.

It is important to note that in this case it is a woman who is promoting androcentric ideologies. The use of verbalization ('the old woman counselled her') indicates how women, who have faced the woes of patriarchy themselves, expect the same misery placed on other women around them. Any woman, who is not controlled by her man, is labeled as 'churail', someone controlling her man. Such form of misogyny is performed consciously and unconsciously in Pakistani society. It is embedded in its customs and social norms. Hence, it can be said that patriarchy is sustained by both men and women. Mothers and grandmothers promote misogynistic cultural values by passing them down to their children and grandchildren.

In sentence 2, the use of direct speech ('Evil frequents those who defy their roles in life . . . ') makes the text more authentic and reliable. Moreover, it indicates that the idea does not belong to the writer, but to original speaker of the statement. The reader is aware of interference of the narrator, and understands the distance between them and the original speaker. In case of indirect speech, they automatically conclude that the narrator is hiding some information. In this case, the novelist has directly quoted what the grandmother said to Hinna on her wedding night. Since it is a direct speech, it is not up for debate. The use of deixis of place ('below' and 'above') in sentence 3 of the selected passage refers to social standing of men and women. Pakistani society expects men to dominate women. They have a lead over women in all social situations. In sentence 6, the use of directive ('you must always follow at your husband's heel, so he knows where you are') indicates that grandmother's speech was not merely words; in fact, it was a command to Hinna. It can be concluded that various linguistic tools are used by the novelist to highlight how some older women promote gender discrimination in Pakistani society.

Passage II

The second passage has been taken from the chapter, titled 'gateway the fifth: the afterlife,' of Geometry of God (2009) by Uzma Aslam Khan. The lines are narrated from the point of view of Amal. They occur in a context where Amal goes on a two-week excavation in the planes of extinct Tethys Ocean. While Omar (Amal's husband) and Nana (Amal's grandfather) encourage her to go for her first long excavation, Amal's mother and Omar's mother object to her travelling and excavating alongside men away from home. The discourse highlights that most women in Pakistani society, who have faced gender discrimination themselves, enact the same sexist behaviour on other women, hence repeat the vicious cycle of sexist behaviours. Analysis of the selected discourse helps in exploring the issue of internalized sexism. It also identifies the linguistic tools used by female characters to promote androcentric ideologies. The sentences in the passage have been numbered for the ease of analysis and reference.

> [1] "I try to push away thoughts of Omar's mother, and mine, both of whom telephoned Omar before I left. [2] "How can you let her go? [3] What man would allow that? [4] Catch her!" [5] He offered his mother a pathetic apology, "Next time we'll see what can be done" . . . and flirted with mine, "You know, I have no power!" [6] He knows she adores him even more when she can pity him for being married to me" (Khan, 2008, p. 327; emphasis in original).

Identification and Labeling of Critical Stylistic Tools

1. **Naming and Describing**: Choice of nouns/referencing ("apology," "power"), noun modification, i.e., pre-modifiers and post-modifiers ("pathetic")
2. **Representing Actions/Events/States**: Material action intentional ("telephoned"), mental cognition ("knows," "know"), mental reaction ("adores"), possessive relations ("I have no power"), verbalization ("He offered his mother a pathetic apology")
3. **Hypothesizing**: Epistemic modality ("can")
4. **Negating**: "no"
5. **Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants:** Direct speech ("How can you let her go? What man would allow that? Catch her!")
6. **Representing Time, Space and Society**: Deixis of place ("away"), deixis of time ("before"), deixis of person ("I," "he," "she," "we," "you")
7. **Speech Acts**: Directives ("How can you let her go?," "Catch her!"), commissive ("Next time we'll see what can be done . . . ")

Critical Stylistic Analysis

In sentence 1, the discourse producer through MAI 'telephoned' highlights that both Amal's mother and Omar's mother called Omar, and objected to his decision to let Amal go on a field trip with her male colleagues. The use of MAI reveals that the action is intentional and performed by conscious beings. The pronoun 'you' in sentence 2 is italicized to prioritize it. The use of contrastive stress here shows that since Omar is a man, most people in Pakistani society would expect him to control his wife's movements. Using epistemic modality 'would' reveals how both Amal's mother and Omar's mother question his decision to allow her to go. Through a directive 'Catch her!' they urge him to stop her. It is unfortunate that in Pakistani society many women play a definite role in oppressing other women. They help propagate patriarchal ideas. Mothers and grandmothers ask girls to be submissive and obedient wives. Likewise, they ask their sons and grandsons to control their wives, to allow them little freedom. Most of the older women find it hard to support younger women, especially the ones that break barriers and stereotypes. Hence, it can be said that sexism should not be misrecognized as a practice of men alone. Women are equally guilty of it.

In sentence 5, through verbalization the discourse producer indicates that Omar gives a 'pathetic apology' to his mother, stating that he will stop Amal next time. Omar likes Amal for being independent, hence, has no intention of stopping her from progressing in her career. The use of pre-modifier ('pathetic') not only gives information about the noun 'apology,' but is really a description of a process. In other words, expanded noun phrase is used by the narrator to reduce distinction between the entity and the process. In sentence 6, the discourse producer through an MR ('adores') reveals that Amal's mother pities Omar for being married to her rebellious daughter. As transitivity offers different options, so the discourse producer suppresses some possibilities. In other words, the lexical verbs (e.g., 'telephoned,' 'knows,' 'adores,' 'offered') used present the situation in a way that the writer desires. Hence, various linguistic tools are used by the discourse producer to highlight how most of the older women play a role in promoting gender discrimination in Pakistani society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the issue of internalized sexism in the novels of Uzma Aslam Khan. The study concludes that although most men in Pakistani society have a lead over women in social situations, androcentric ideologies are promoted by both men and women. The analysis of selected passages from Khan's novels highlights that several older Pakistani women, including mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, and aunts, reinforce androcentric ideologies on younger women. According to them, a wife can only be labeled as 'good' if she follows the commands of her husband and not vice versa. Here, it is important to highlight that these women by virtue of their age and status in their respective families abuse their power to play a definite role in oppressing other women. These women say harmful things about other women and doubt themselves because of their gender. They take other women less seriously than men, and believe that women are well-suited to traditional 'nurturing' roles that do not involve scientific or pedagogical skills. These women need time to heal from this sort of mentality.

A novel is an amalgamation of different incidents which are logically interconnected. These incidents happen to different characters whose voices often clash with one another in terms of point of views, perspectives, world views and ideologies. For instance, in The Story of Noble Rot (2001), Mrs. Masood feels helpless in changing her circumstances. Moreover, she believes in unquestioned submission and servitude towards her husband. Hence, she feels guilty when she disobeys her husband. On the other hand, Malika vows to change her family's financial situation and takes brave decisions. She is proud to be successful in challenging the men around her. Similarly, Geometry of God (2008) reveals two generations of women. The older generation of women, like Apa Farzana, plays their role in spreading patriarchal beliefs and the new generation of women, like Amal, challenges those beliefs by choosing careers, not popular among women, and by working side by side with men. Some female characters have pro-feminist beliefs; others support anti-feminist ideas. A thorough study of these different perspectives and points of view considering Paul Simpson's (1993) work on points of view can yield interesting results. It can help in understanding how these different perspectives are generated, what factors affect these points of view in establishing, and how they impact other women in the surroundings.

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