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## " A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz: A Feminist Perspective"

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### Abstract

Qaisra Shahraz is a fantastic storyteller, whether it comes to working on television plays, books, or short stories. Through her works, viewers and readers are introduced to the engrossing and intricate stories having three-dimensional characters living in a world characterized by cultural contrast and conflict. Her debut, "A Pair of Jeans" has been widely read throughout several nations. The researcher analyses the elements of feminism in the selected short story through the character of Miriam. The framework of Lois Tyson serves as a vehicle for elaborating feministic principles of the short story "A Pair of Jeans" from different perspectives such as oppression, shame, objectification of women, patriarchal society and gender resistance. In addition to attentive reading, the researcher uses the textual analysis approach to identify the aforementioned plot points. To substantiate the topic under investigation, the researcher assesses a large number of research articles.

**Keywords:** Oppression, Shame, Objectifying Women, Patriarchal System

### Introduction

Qaisra Shahraz (1958) is an internationally acclaimed British-Pakistani author and a gender activist. She focuses on the issues of feministic concern through strong characterization in her writings. Therefore, a strong sense of feminist consciousness is found in her works. 'A Pair of Jeans & Other Stories (2013)' is her first collection of short stories and the title story became so famous that it was translated in various languages and got published in different countries. The themes of feminism are presented by Shahraz within 'the experience of migration, settlement, racism and ethnic identity in a hostile society' (Hussain, 2005: 132).

Therefore, contemporary feminist fiction writers like Qaisra Shahraz mostly discuss issues faced by women in a society where gender discriminatory practices are observed. 'A Pair of Jeans' is a story about Miriam, a British-Pakistani Muslim girl who is an amalgamation of Eastern and Western values. She grapples between traditional upbringing and liberal western society and tries to keep a balance between both the cultures, however fails to do so as she is caught dressed in a shrunken west under the unbuttoned jacket with tight jeans clad legs by her in-laws who are shown to be strictly cultural and tied to their traditional values despite living in the UK for years.

The research holds significant importance because it examines the content of selected short story for all possible components of feminism. However, other researchers have only discussed it from the perspective of either gender resistance, patriarchy or objectification of women. The present study aims to point out the elements of feminism in the selected Pakistani short story and highlights the multifaceted issues faced by women in form of gender discrimination, oppression, patriarchal society, subjugation and criticism faced by women on morality just because of the way they dress.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Lois Tyson in her "Essay on Feminist Literary Theory" defined feminist criticism as: "Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson, 2006, p. 83).

The concept of feminism has been around for ages. However, it began properly in somewhat late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of first wave of feminism. It sought to focus on women's right to vote and property rights. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s and focused on extensive issues of domestic violence and workplace bias faced by women. The third wave of feminism began around the 1990s, and it worked for the advancement of the goals of the second wave.

Patriarchy confines women behind the four walls and treats them just like an object. As said by Lois Tyson in her essay: "Patriarchy treats women, whatever their role, like objects". (Tyson, 2006, p. 91). Women are considered to be submissive to the traditional gender roles set by the patriarchal society. "Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). Thus, by applying the framework of Feminist criticism by Lois Tyson, we are able to

analyze the selected short story "A Pair of Jeans" from a feministic perspective to delve into the complexities of wide range of issues faced by women in a patriarchal society.

### **Research Objectives**

- To find out the elements that make 'A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz' a text of feminism.
- To explore the challenges which are encountered by the protagonist of 'A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz' in a patriarchal society

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the elements that make 'A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz' a text of feminism?
2. What challenges are encountered by the protagonist 'A Pair of Jeans by Qaisra Shahraz' in a patriarchal society?

### **Literature Review**

Finding one's research and placing it within the current body of knowledge is the aim of a literature review. The carried-out study has a direct bearing on this. The reader will be able to understand the background and context of the study. It also informs us about the purpose and importance of the conducted research. In order to investigate the dynamic and complex nature of gender representation in all of its complexities within the framework of Pakistani patriarchal society, this research attempts to critically examine the notion of feministic perspective in Qaisra Shahraz's "A Pair of Jeans & Other Stories" (2013) by employing the theoretical framework of "Feminist Criticism" presented by "Lois Tyson".

The focus of Tyson's feminism is based on the idea that: Men are privileged and in positions of power in society; women are subjected to prejudice and unfair treatment; and gender norms and stereotypes limit the potential of women. Acknowledging and combating how women are marginalized in society recognizing prejudices and viewpoints that support injustice, understanding how various forms of oppression (such as those based on race, class, or gender) interact and fighting for the rights and empowerment of women. To put it briefly, Tyson's feminism advocates for women's empowerment and liberation by exposing and opposing the structures that uphold gender injustice. Thus, the study's main goal is to determine whether a few of Qaisra Shahraz's short stories reinforce or contradict conventional, stereotypical ideas about womanhood. (Parveen, 2019)

The protagonist in Qaisra Shahraz's 2013 book A Pair of Jeans and Other Stories is a girl named Miriam. The tension between traditional and modern values is symbolized by her

oscillation between the two worlds. Conflicts emerge not only between generations but also between values. New concepts, customs, regulations, and cultural norms could be more difficult for some generations to embrace than for others. Conversely, there is a generation that is flexible and can adjust to changes in their surroundings. (Fatima, 2022). The continuous oscillation of protagonist Miriam back and forth between the two worlds represents the conflict between traditional and modern values. Conflicts arise between values as well as between generations. Some generations may find it harder than others to accept new ideas, practices, laws, and cultural norms. On the other hand, a certain generation is adaptable and capable of adjusting to changes in their environment. The way Miriam is positioned in this short story must be understood by understanding the narrator's attitude towards them. (Kurniyati, 2019).

### **Research Methodology**

The selected short story "A Pair of Jeans" is analyzed by the researcher through the perspective of feminism to discover the elements of feminism in the above-mentioned text with the help of textual analysis along with close reading. According to McKee, "textual analysis helps to uncover the underlying meaning of the text and it is an educational guess" (McKee, 2001).

### **Textual Analysis**

The selected short story has been discussed by other scholars either from a narrow perspective or from the controversy related to gender resistance and patriarchy however, this research analyzes the text of the story likely for all elements of feminism. The researcher studies the story for the following feminist factors: oppression, shame, patriarchal system, marriage and freedom, objectifying women, and gender resistance.

### **Oppression**

Miriam, the protagonist of the short story "A Pair of Jeans", faces oppression in the form of cultural expectations and fixed gender roles that limit her right to freedom. She is subjected to judgment by her prospective in-laws when they see her wearing jeans and a jacket exposing her naked midriff, which doesn't align with her Eastern traditions. As a result, her moral values and ethics are questioned just because of a piece of clothing. She was being victimized based on her dress code. "A very modest girl. Was that naked waist what you." Miriam being a hybrid entity belonging to a Muslim family living in England is found oscillating between eastern and western values. She considers jeans just a piece of clothing. "They are only clothes. I am still the same young woman they visited regularly—the person that they have happily chosen as a bride for their son in their household". However, the very same piece of clothing became the reason why her

engagement got called off by her in-laws-who are shown to be strictly traditional and stereotypical, to whom Miriam was an epitome of perfection earlier and now the same Miriam had become a stranger to them because they had encountered the western version of her. These superficial societal standards highlight the oppressive nature of a patriarchal society. "All women are subject to patriarchal oppression" (Tyson, 2006, p. 105).

### **Shame**

Miriam is regarded as a shameful figure by her in-laws as they had spotted her in modern Western clothes. To them, women's clothing and appearance are linked with family's honor and they see Miriam's attire as a violation of these traditional Eastern norms. Upon the arrival of her in-laws, Miriam herself becomes conscious about her clothes. "Her cheeks burnt in embarrassment.... All she was aware of was the surreptitious glances they darted at her..." They even ignore her salutation as if she is not the same person and is now some kind of alien who belongs to another planet. "The father-in-law had ignored it. That was not like him at all". The very first words uttered for Miriam by her father-in-law were: "I thought you told me that she was a very "sharif", a very modest girl... "Sharif! dressed like that!". These lines show that Mr. Ayub is a patriarch who raises questions about the moral values of women based on their clothes.

Even her own mother is ashamed of her dress. "She felt ashamed of her daughter's clothing...An inch of her daughter's flesh was visible! Her mind reeling and the urge to usher her out of sight..." Upon arrival at their own house, Mr. Ayub, the father-in-law started making weird comments about Miriam. "Don't your cheeks burn at the thought of that bit of flesh you saw? Imagine how our son will feel about her! I hope shame! And what if she has a boyfriend already--have you thought of that? What if she has a boyfriend already? What if she takes drugs?". This shows the narrow-mindedness of patriarchal men who pass judgment about women based on their clothing. To him, Miriam appears as a modern, rebellious, insensitive, wicked and rather a symbol of shame.

### **Objectifying women**

"Objectification broadly means treating a person as a commodity or an object without regard to his/her personality or dignity" (Dr Sajid Ali, 2001). Treating women as an object is one of the basic premises of patriarchal society. It objectifies and oppresses women which leads to gender inequality and discrimination. In the selected short story, not only the protagonist but the wife of Mr. Ayub, Begum, is also treated as an object or a puppet whose opinion is not asked and rather is forced to call off her son's engagement with Miriam despite liking her. "I leave that entirely to you--especially as you were the one so hot on the girl".

Lois Tyson in her essay "Feminist Criticism" argues that: "Patriarchy treats women, whatever their role, like objects: like objects, women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions. After all, from a patriarchal standpoint, women's perspectives, feelings, and opinions don't count unless they conform to those of patriarchy" (Tyson, 2006, p. 91). Upon close analysis of the text, it is revealed that the patriarchal dominance of society is the main culprit behind the objectification of women. This stereotypical mindset makes women conscious about their selves and they start objectifying themselves. "She wanted to quickly rush inside her home and peel them (her jeans) off". This line from the original text of the selected short story shows that Miriam becomes conscious about herself when she experiences the superstitious glances of her in-laws darted at her.

### **Patriarchal system**

The concept of patriarchy by Walby in his book "Theorizing Patriarchy" has been discussed as: "A system of social structures and practice in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women..." (Walby, 1989). Miriam despite living in England is treated according to the whims of a patriarchal system. Patriarchy bestows on men the fundamental rights of household control. Similar is the case with Mr. Ayub, the father-in-law of Miriam who is shown to be a patriarch controlling the life of his son Farook and Miriam being an extension to him also becomes a victim of his father's rule.

Qaisra Shahraz in this short story presented two different kinds of women: Begum and Miriam. Begum conforms to the patriarchal system of society and does whatever her husband tells her to do. Even after 25 years of their marriage, Begum was still given no authority in the house to disagree or show disapproval toward his decisions. Whereas Miriam on the other hand stands against the patriarchal injustices.

### **Gender resistance**

This research not only discusses the elements of feminism but also delves into the notion of gender resistance where strong female characters resist the patriarchal norms and go against the traditional concept of conformity linked to women by the society. Miriam denounces stereotypical gender norms to reclaim her identity which was being concealed by victimizing her as a symbol of shame. However, she doesn't accept the decision of calling off her marriage by the father-in-law; rather she undermines the decision and becomes resistant to it. "They can't do this to me!" her mind screamed. She didn't know whether Farook knew about this matter, but she was going to make sure that he definitely did". In this way she redefines her gender identity.

## Conclusion

Qaisra Shahraz is a Pakistani British novelist who navigates the issues of gender, race, cultural and moral divides in her works. Shahraz focuses on the themes of deeply rooted issues in Pakistani society such as women's rights, feminism, feudalism, and patriarchy. Shahraz's most of the works revolve around similar themes because of her hybrid background. This research explores the components of feminism. Moreover, it demonstrates the ways in which Miriam encounters the challenges such as oppression, stereotypical gendered norms, treated as an object rather than a human being etc. There is a famous quote by Thomas Edison, "A single sheet of paper cannot decide my future", similarly a single piece of clothing cannot conclude a person's character and whereabouts.

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