

Rewriting Women: Media, Literature, and the Evolution of Female Representation in Pakistan

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Abstract

Different narratives are formed and reformed about women in Pakistan, with the passage of time. These narratives portray fixed identities and roles of women in Pakistan. Newspapers, editorials and articles play an important role in shaping these narratives and raising issues about women through their specific use of vocabulary and linguistic choices. This research aims to study how a major Pakistani newspaper, “DAWN” (Lahore) represents point of view about women in its articles from January 2024 to January 2025. Through this archival analysis of newspaper, the research also provides an insight into the historical and cultural impact on the role of the media and literature in addressing issues and identities of women. Also, other than these journalistic discourses, the research looks into some scripts from literature for supporting reference. Overall, through a feminist approach and Hayden White’s historical lens, the study focuses on the evolution of women’s representation in Pakistani literature written in different forms. The research finally tries to present whether journalistic discourse is a neutral portrayal or a biased perspective about women in society.

Keywords: Archival Research, Historical Lens, Feminism, Journalistic Discourse, Literature

Introduction

With the passage of time and struggles the voice of women started to emerge in media and literature. The chapter 10 of text book, “Global Women’s Issues: Women in the World Today, extended version” glances upon the history of emergence of women in media discourses (2012). The exclusion of women from serious new was firstly questioned by women suffragists in North America and

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Europe. The early suffrage leaders needed attention to their ideas from the news media but the male newspapers and magazines ignored them. Also, if women demanded equality with men, they were depicted as loud, militant and aggressive in news media. Such treatment, inspired women to setup their own publishing houses, newspapers and magazines in later 20th century. Magazines and journals like “Ms. Magazine” and “Manushi” were founded in 1970s.

By the late 20th century, some feminist leaders started representing misogyny and women in mainstream media. As the time moved onward various voices about women started to raise in media and are still raised. DAWN’s opinionated articles are also a powerful platform to shape the issues of women raised in Pakistan. This research analyzes some of those articles to examine that from which school of thought the women are shaped and how the factual data about women is molded to make a strong opinion.

Similarly, in literature the presentation of women character has also evolved. Tippabhotla Vyomakesisri in his research article “Presentation of Women in Literature from Past to Present” looks into evolution of female characters in literature. It examines that from Sita and Draupadi to Shakespearean’s plays and Spenser’s epics, the heroines are shaped by male dominated societies often, reflecting gender bias. With the progress of time modern and the contemporary writers challenged these stereotypes by presenting women’s inner struggles, search for identity and resistance to patriarchy (2017). Our research examines the representation of women in literary fiction. The novel selected for this insight is “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti” by Mohammed Hanif (2011).

Overall, this study focuses on the representation of Pakistani women in newspaper articles and fictional writing. It tries to present the difference in women’s depiction in fiction and media and its neutrality or biasedness through feminist lenses and Hayden Whites historical lenses.

Methodology

This study follows the qualitative research method. Archival research is applied to analyze the newspaper’s articles which are extracted from the DAWN newspapers taken from the newspaper archives section of the main library of “University of the Punjab, Lahore”. Also, it includes an analysis of fiction and journalistic texts through

different lenses. The theoretical framework applied to analyze the text is feminist and Hayden White's historical lens.

Mary Wollstonecraft also known as, "Mother of Feminism" advocates her feminist philosophy in her book "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)". She argues that women should have an education proportional with their position in society. She claims that women are essential to the nation because they educate children and because they could be "companions" to their husbands rather than mere wives. This research article will analyze newspaper articles and the novel "Our Lad of Alice Bhatti" by Mohammed Hanif from the given philosophy of feminism to examine the use of different techniques in it.

Moreover, other sub types of feminist approaches are applied in the text like Radical feminism, Marxist feminism and Islamic feminism. Simone De Beauvoir, a foundational figure of radical feminism, critiques that women are defined as the inessential "Other" and are considered inferior. The "otherness" of women is greatly highlighted in print media and literature that is analyze in this research paper. Also, Angela Davis's Marxist feminist lens is applied on the text to show how capitalism, racism and patriarchy are linked together to oppress women and cause gender inequality. Additionally, Fatema Mernissi's Islamic feminist approach is also applied on the respective text. Through this lens the study will examine that how Islam's core message is corrupted by patriarchal interpretation.

Furthermore, Hayden Whites historical lens is used to interpret opinionated articles that four master tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) are used to interpret historical and factual data. Similarly, in articles, authors use factual data to describe regarding the women voices.

Discussion

This research dives into how a major Pakistani newspaper, "DAWN" represents point of view about women in its opinionated articles from January 2024 to January 2025. It also analyzes a famous novel "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti" by Mohammed Hanif. Through this analysis the research examines the historical and cultural impact on the role of media and literature highlighting the identities of women. Also, that how a specific narrative style is used to portray women in written texts. Different theories are applied here to examines the text more deeply.

Simone De Beauvoir's Radical feminism is applied in the opinionated articles of the newspaper. The article "Humanitarian Women" by Rafia Zakaria celebrates the resistance and strength of women's in Pakistan. It reflects that women define themselves through their acts, actions and survival rather than passively accepting their roles. The women reject to live like a second sex or merely a woman with no strength and power or just a mother or wife.

Also, in another article, "Curious case of Priya Kumari", Shahab Usto critiques how the society construct the women as the "Other". This newspaper article clearly portrays Priya Kumari as the second sex in a socio legal context. It mirrors how Priya's unfortunate situation is linked to her gender and class. Also, it shows the role of local feudal tribal patriarchy in suppressing women and considering them as something inessential.

Additionally, Arifa Noor's article, "No country for women" applies radical feminist approach to show that women face violence, arrests and online harassments not because of proven crimes but because of them being a woman and because they dared to raise their voice in public and political space. This is clear when, Arifa Noor writes, "Women who dare speak out are not welcomed here and some of them will be punished". It also sheds light upon the treatment of Mahrang Baloch, Sammi Deen, Yasmin Rashid and Aliya Hamza to expose the systematic pattern of silencing of women. This article also shows that how misogyny shapes media narratives. Also, this article supports this point by referring to a journalist who accuses a politician's wife on doing magic, reducing women to mere stereotype.

All the given articles support Simone De Beauvoir claims that women are discouraged at public platforms by considering them as another.

Furthermore, Fatema Mernissi "Islamic Feminist" theory is also applicable on the articles written about women. The article "Humanitarian Women" by Rafia Zakaria is also examined from this lens. As seen in the text "Muslim countries share similar conservative cultural values. People in these states are often wary of formal institutions such as courts to resolve disputes or address sexual violence. Efforts to eliminate gender-based violence here have meet with obstacles as top-down laws and programs do not include communities as stakeholders and thus end up producing only temporary change at best". This text aligns with Mernissi's point of

view that government institutions do not follow the core of religious message, instead they are a part of patriarchal system.

Also, the article, “Honour or Dishonour” by Gaitee Ara, challenges the honor killing by refereeing it to Islam. As it is written in the text, “If argued religiously, Islam is very vocal on the subject and grants equal rights to men and women to marry of their own choice. Then why are women treated as children of a lesser God?”. Here the use of rhetorical appeal and Islamic feminist approach, the conservative audience can also be persuaded. This shows how specific narrative style appeals a specific audience.

Moreover, Angela Davis’s Marxist feminist lens, is also applied on some opinionated articles. Sara Danials, “Addressing the Digital Gender Gap” refers to the Davis’s concept of unpaid social reproductive labor. Davis lens mirrors that the digital gap is not just a failure of a policy instead it is deeply rooted in capitalism that relies on the women’s unwaged labor to maximize profit. The economically unfortunate women, lack the capital to overcome the affordability issues and are more likely to bear heavy unpaid labor burdens. Also, Dawn’s editorial “Breaking Barriers” states “access to screening must be expanded, especially in rural areas” and “screenings must be free or subsidized for low-income women”. This shows that women’s ability to receive healthcare is shaped by structural and economic factors. By applying Angela Davis’s lens, it is seen that the struggle against breast cancer is not only a media issue but also a social and economic justice issue. Moreover, Huma Yusuf in her article “Issue Based Politics” states that “Female politicians are typically the result of dynastic politics or quota system”. From Davis’s lens, it argues that elite women’s politics does not represent the liberation of working class. Women in politics belongs to a capitalist elite setup, not to ordinary women.

Likewise, Hayden White’s historical lens is also applied on these newspaper articles. In Shahab Usto’s, “Curious Case of Priya Kumari” the use of rhetorical strategies that structures the facts into a compelling, morally changed narrative is seen. The author selects specific details of “Nazim Jokhios” case and arranges it with Priya’s case to broader themes of systematic failure and the vulnerability of poor. This strategic arrangement is an act of interpretation similar to historical emplotment. Through White’s lens this article tries to demand public opinion and moral judgement, rather than narrating mere events and historical facts. Also, the Dawn’s editorial, “Protect Women” states, “10,201 cases of domestic violence against women in Punjab 2023”

and “32pc of women in Pakistan experienced physical violence”. All these factual and historical facts are used to create an impression about the intensity of patriarchal control and narrative of ongoing oppression. Moreover, Sara Danial’s, *Addressing the Digital Gap*” presents factual data like “women-led startups receive 23pc less funding and have 30pc lower chance of a successful exits than led those by men”. This data is not simply a neutral representation of reality, instead it is carefully selected to support the author’s ideological stance. Additionally, in Huma Khan’s article “All About Women” metaphors like “broken the shackles of slavery” refers to Taliban’s historical impact on women’s right. Also, the author mentions factual data like, “ranking 145 out of 146” to evoke a sense of pain and an attempt for change. Also, this shows the inability to fully escape from past.

However, a specific set of vocabulary is used in these articles. Words and phrases like honor, dishonor, blasphemous, biases, tradition, culture, mindsets, misogyny, disapproval, maternal, feudal, punish, violence and body perish are used to convey the intensity of women oppression and the role of traditional norms in silencing women. The use rhetorical question is also seen in most of the articles for generating opinions from the reader.

On the other hand, a fictional text “Our Lady of Alice Bhatti” by Mohammed Hanif is analyzed by the same theoretical approaches. It represents the story of women a female nurse’ “Alice Bhatti” to reflect the social flaws and oppression on women in workplace and even in domestic sphere. Simon De Beauvoir, radical feminist lens is applicable on the text. As it is narrated “Mostly people call her a ‘daughter’ or ‘sister’ and then do exactly what they do with their own sisters and daughters: they treat her like a slave they bought at a clearance sale.” (Hanif,82). This highlights the Beauvoir’s idea of otherness of women that they are treated as men slave. This also shows how women are considered inferior even in workplaces. However, unlike newspaper articles, fictional texts closely observe the victims or characters and give a direct voice them to portray their oppression, which is not seen in newspaper articles. It also closely observes the life of marginalized women in society as Alice Bhatti is a Christian woman who belongs to a lower class. This can also align with Priya’s case because she was a Hindu girl also belonging to lower class, faced physical violence too. The abduction of Priya Kumari and acid attack on Alice Bhatti somehow aligns with each other.

Also, through Hayden White lens it is seen that the crimes of Karachi and the police department setup of 2011 is reflected through the use of different literary and narrative techniques.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, through the archival analysis of newspaper articles it is seen that print media offers voice and raises issues about women on a wider platform. The authors use statistical data and real historical events to reflect the women identities in Pakistan and how they are oppressed. These articles are somehow neutral because they represent women in their actual form seen, in Pakistan. Likewise, fictional texts also present Pakistani women but in a detailed way. A close observation of the female character is seen. Their gestures, and words are narrated in the text. Opinionated article somehow fails to mirrors the gesture, actual words and emotions of victims. In contrast print media cover a large number of audience or readers which a fictional text fails to do. Overall, both type of written texts has their own value and essence which can't be denied.

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