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Exploring Gender Stereotyping and Objectification in Mueenuddin's *Saleema*: A Feminist Analysis Using Simone de Beauvoir's Theory

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ABSTRACT

Gender stereotyping has been a persistent practice in patriarchal societies, reinforcing male dominance over women and marginalizing their roles. Literature often serves as a medium through which such societal norms are perpetuated, presenting women as less powerful and subordinate to men. This research critically examines the objectification of women in *Saleema*, a short story by Daniyal Mueenuddin, through the lens of feminist theory. The story portrays Saleema, a female character navigating life in a male-dominated society where women are frequently marginalized, reduced to objects of male desire, and stripped of agency. The study delves into how Saleema's character is constructed within the narrative, highlighting the intersection of gender, power, and societal expectations. By analyzing the story's depiction of patriarchal oppression, the research explores the broader implications of female objectification on gender roles and representations in literature. Additionally, it investigates how such portrayals shape societal attitudes toward women, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and limiting female empowerment. Through this feminist critique, the study aims to uncover the layers of objectification embedded in the text and how these contribute to the perpetuation of sexism. Furthermore, it situates the discussion within the larger context of feminist literary discourse, offering insights into the ways literature can both reflect and challenge societal norms. By examining *Saleema* as a case study, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about gender dynamics, representation, and the role of literature in shaping cultural perceptions of power and identity.

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Introduction

Daniyal Mueenuddin was born with both Pakistani and American backgrounds; he spent his early life in Pakistan before joining the United States' Dartmouth College and Yale University thereafter. He remembers that being an outsider is sometimes frustrating but also fun while he describes feeling like an outsider in either country. This dual nationality is something he cherishes because, depending on the context, he can feel more American or Pakistani at different times (Neary 2009; Trachtenberg 2009). This unique cultural positioning is evident in his literary works, which often navigate the intersections of identity, tradition, and modernity. Among his notable short stories, "Saleema" stands out for its poignant portrayal of complex relationships between genders within a male-dominated society. The narrative offers an intricate analysis of women's objectification, shedding light on the ways societal structures shape female agency and identity. In this feminist study, we embark on a critical exploration of how "Saleema" navigates themes of female agency, identity construction, and societal power structures, particularly through the lens of objectification. The character Saleema is at the center of this investigation as her experiences and interactions in the narrative are used as a focal point to understand how women are depicted as objects in patriarchal societies. In a cultural context where women are often boxed into roles that prioritize male desires and perceptions, Saleema's story highlights wider issues concerning sexism and gender inequality. Feminist literary theory provides an excellent framework for understanding these complexities in relation to the text. Using this perspective, we can undress some layers of objectification embedded in the narrative while examining how her identity has been influenced by male perspectives and her limited agency within traditionalized gender roles. Moreover, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about representation, agency, and power dynamics in literature, particularly focusing on the ways in which female characters are constructed and the impact of such representations on broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and relationships. By applying a feminist lens to Saleema, we aim to uncover the nuanced meanings behind instances of femininity portrayed in the narrative, offering insights into the persistent challenges faced by women in patriarchal cultures. Through this

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analysis, we hope to foster a deeper understanding of how literature not only reflects societal norms but also challenges and redefines them.

Literature Review

Most of the investigations on Saleema, a short narrative by Daniyal Mueenuddin, have been carried out from feminist perspective. This literature review integrates existing researches into the assessment of the feminist themes and stylistic devices utilized by Mueenuddin. Feminism as a movement which started roughly around the end of 19th century has taken different forms to attain political, personal, economic and social rights for women. Towards the close of twentieth century feminist stylistics gained popularity with Mills' (1995) most renowned publication in this area. As an independent subfield within Stylistics it applies stylistic models and frameworks to study gendered concerns linguistically encoded in texts (Montoro,2014). For instance Anila Afzal and Asmat A. Sheikh gave an example of Mueenuddin's (2009) "Saleema" compared with Qaisra Shahraz's(1998) "Zamindar's Wife." Their analysis examines how gender roles, power dynamics and agency shape representations of women in these texts. The above research is a primer into what comprises feminist criticism when one considers Mueenuddin's work. Zafar Ali, Samina Akhtar, and Muhammad Shafiq Vol(6), No(1) contribute to this debate with their critical discourse analysis on "Saleema." They deconstruct language or narrative constructs that mask hidden gender identity issues through application of feminist linguistic theories. Such speech can thus be used either to reinforce or undermine constructed roles expected from genders hence creating female identities in Mueenuddin's narrative. A post-colonial lens is employed by Shamaila Dodhy (2014)223-242 who looks at "Saleema" revealing how it re-interprets colonial practices.She situates her analysis within wider sociopolitical contexts that scrutinize intersections between culture, power relations and colonialism. Dodhy's research helps in adding more meaning to feminist reading of Mueenuddin's works as it discusses the relation between gender and colonialism in the case. Omama Tanvir and Nazish Amir (2017) bring up deconstructive analysis to explore the multiple meanings in "Saleema." They critique conventional concepts about presentation of gender roles using this perspective. These authors argue against static interpretations and invite rears to question fixed notions about gender within the narrative. Usama Mumtaz Lali (2003) portrays Punjabi women as imagined by Mueenuddin."In Other Rooms, Other Wonders" is compared with "Saleem" by Lali to illustrate how some themes are common throughout many Mueenuddin's writings. This method helps our understanding on how characters are built across different narratives by Mueenuddin. According to Ali and Gavino (2008), GBV is a complex issue that is rooted in social, cultural, and structural inequalities that demand interventions against patriarchy, poverty, and education. Bhattacharya (2014) examines socio-economic disparities linking them towards sexual violence against women in Pakistan. Her paper constitutes an analysis pinpointing the idea that GBV is influenced by other systems such as classism which calls for intervention at structural level. As per Lakoff(1973), women are massively marginalized in language socially and linguistically. It is commonly thought that forceful statements are for men while submissive ones belong to women. Women are often seen as objects of desire with their roles being secondary and dependent on men(Lakoff, 1973,p. 51). Girls grow up with the idea that their happiness and comfort should come from men primarily. Therefore, social norms have stripped women's speech, personality and representation. Mental weakness is what typifies how they are commonly looked at by them as a weaker sex as portrayed by Lakoff (p.51) This is euphemistic in its attempt to dignify it' "girl" or "lady". Through this process of social discourse manipulated male power there is justice done about gender inequality towards women which forces ladies into conformity. They are not allowed to be part of any male activities except in Pakistan where cultural practices prohibit them. A research carried out by Fikree, Razzak & Durocher (2005) examined Pakistani men's attitudes on domestic violence; hence it showed deep-seated patriarchal values that legitimize and justify violence against females. Their results emphasize the importance of contesting traditional gender roles, promoting gender equitable attitudes and behaviors etc." For instance, engaging men in fighting GBV can effectively address the root causes leading to positive change within societies . Another approach followed by Keren (2012) and Katz (2017) is explaining how language has made light of sexual violence through framing it within the context of a "women's issue" thereby absolving men from their actions.. They call for a discursive shift towards acknowledging the involvement of males in addressing issues related to gender-based violence. Hadi (2017) considers patriarchy as one major deep- rooted cause for GBV in Pakistan whereby emphasis should be given on education and awareness drives aimed at challenging patriarchal values and promoting gender equity. She calls for community-based initiatives that are truly women-focused, empower women and challenge oppressive structures within their communities.

Theoretical Framework

Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory as articulated in her seminal work "The Second Sex" will inform this theoretical framework with reference to the short story "Saleema" by Daniyal Mueenuddin. The significance of De Beauvoir's arguments concerning gender oppression, commodification, economic dependence and self-realization in the narrative is considered so as to keep alive these insights even now on contemporary literature.Central to de Beauvoir's feminist theory is her concept of "the Other." Women are usually marginalized and seen against men rather than being considered autonomous individuals (De Beauvoir). In "Saleema," she is mostly portrayed through her interactions with males including her husband and employer. The wife, servant and sexual partner roles that Saleema assumes demonstrate how women's identities are constructed relative to men in line with de Beauvoir's position on this issue. According to her husband and employer, Saleema is actually an "Other". Her sense of self is largely derived from how these men perceive and treat her. (De Beauvoir,1952) Moreover, De Beauvoir also expounds more on how females are objectified because of their value mainly for procreation or simply sex objects. This theme can be found in the story titled "Saleema" where the worthiness of its title character lies solely on her sexual encounters thereby reducing it into just another domesticated animal whose choice-making ability has been taken away by a man defined society. Women's oppression is rooted in economic dependence, according to de Beauvoir. Financial instability marks the life of Saleema and it compels her to seek relationships with men that are dependent on financial grounds. This restricts her independence and perpetuate her subordination. What drives Saleema into her marriage as well as other subsequent relationships is mainly economics. De Beauvoir referred to this when she talked about how women were limited by a lack of financial freedom (De Beauvoir, S. 1952). Self-actualization can be achieved by women only if they refuse to tolerate oppressive structures as argued by de Beauvoir. In her life, she constantly struggles with this as she tries to establish her place in a patriarchal society. Other feminist battles for independence and self-determination are highlighted by the narrative's concurrent efforts to define the main character away from imposed roles. Throughout the story, these actions and decisions correspond with a battle for independence on Saleema's part. The desire of asserting herself as an individual echoes de Beauvoir's idea of self-actualization (De Beauvoir, 1952).

Statement of the Problem

The problem this research addresses is the long-standing use of gender stereotypes and objectification of women in patriarchal societies as evidenced by Daniyal Mueenuddin's "Saleema," which portrays women as sub-human and sex objects hence encouraging misogyny or no less than sexism. The story is therefore to be understood in a way that will help in answering broader questions about how gender works across societies, what societal structures are and how men are given power over women, and what a feminist perspective in literature looks like. In this study, we use Greenhum's close-reading approach for analyzing Mueenuddin's Saleema by applying Simone de Beauvoir's Feminist Theory to understand the complexities of female agency, identity construction and societal norms described therein; thus reaffirming the significance of feminist discourses in contemporary literature.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate how feminism explains economic situations, internal struggles suffered by the protagonist and how it affects her character development.
2. To identify instances where gender roles are defined along patriarchal lines.
3. To examine ways through which women characters negotiate their way out of societal Expectations.

Research Questions:

1. To what extent does feminist theory depict socio-economic realities and protagonist internal conflicts in Mueenuddin's saleema?
2. How this story does critiques patriarchy from a feminist viewpoint?
3. How does portrayal of female characters reflect societal norms regarding the objectification of women resulting in an understanding of gender-related roles?

Methodology

Greenhum's methodology of close reading in literature focuses on the detailed examination of a specific text. It involves an in-depth analysis of language, structure, and themes to uncover deeper meanings and interpret the text effectively. This approach also explores elements such as symbolism, imagery, characterization, and narrative techniques to enable rich, and sometimes ambiguous, interpretations. According to Greenhum, close reading allows readers to gain deeper insights into the work, often revealing the intentions of the author and enhancing comprehension. Books, articles, and journals serve as the primary sources of data for this study. The analysis was conducted using Greenhum close reading approach. Greenhum (2018) emphasizes that “close reading is how one should approach the novel.” Mastering close reading has been an essential skill in literature, one that students refine at every stage of their education..

Data Analysis

Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist theory could help expound on socio-economic realities, internal conflict experienced by protagonist, broader feminist issues that are contained in Daniyal Mueenuddin short story known as "Saleema." De Beauvoir’s key ideas especially those from "The Second Sex," revolve around female being seen as “Other” by male-dominated societies where they struggle to secure identity and autonomy.

Socio-Economic Realities And Protagonist's Internal Struggles:

Socio-Economic Realities

Her economic status deeply affects the course of Saleema’s life in “Saleema.” She represents the lower class women working for rich families. Her socio-economic standing restricts her choices and opportunities to prosper in life. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir describes how poverty can lead to limited roles that exploit poor women. **“***She stayed on in the city, moving from job to job, her wages barely sufficient to keep her alive***”** Saleema’s decision to remain in the city and continue working despite hardships only underscores her limited options and necessity of economic survival**.**

Internal Struggles

Her encounters with men depict her internal struggles as she goes through life. For instance, her relationship with Rafik who works at the farm is characterized by a clash between her aspirations for love and security and the reality of her vulnerability. Beauvoir posits that societal conditioning makes women find validation in relationships, which Saleema’s narrative reveals. *"She wanted more from him, but knew that he saw her as just another woman to be used".*

Broader Feminist Themes And Critiques Of Patriarchal Structures:

It is a critique of patriarchal structures that enslave women like Saleema into subservient positions. This representation of gender relations strongly connects with beauvoir’s analysis about patriarchy as an institution that continues to put down and disregard women everywhere.

Objectification and Exploitation

Saleema’s experiences show how women get objectified and their value is often reduced to their usefulness to men, which is in line with de Beauvoir’s notion that women are frequently perceived as *“Others”* with no individuality.

Lack of Autonomy

This highlights the wider feminist theme of women not having autonomy in a patriarchal society as illustrated by Saleema's limited control over her actions.

"She knew that her place in the household was precarious, dependent on the whims of those above her" (Mueenuddin).

"Rafik took what he wanted from her, giving little in return" (Mueenuddin). Objectification of Women and Gender Dynamics:

"Saleema" presents examples of female characters that defy the societal norms on objectifying women. Mueenuddin reveals the gender dynamics and power structures that dominate in Pakistan through his portrayal of the life and struggles of Saleema.

Challenging Societal Norms

Resistance and Agency

In spite of her subjugation, Saleema occasionally fought against it; she challenged traditional notions used to silence and oppress women.This make the struggles of poor working-class woman visible who have kept strong despite systematic oppression

"She resisted Rafik's advances when she felt he was taking her for granted, asserting her own needs and desires" (Mueenuddin).

"Her daily battles to maintain her dignity and sense of self in a world that constantly tried to diminish her" (Mueenuddin).

Conclusion

In Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story *Saleema*, the dynamics of power and gender inequality are brought into sharp focus, illustrating how societal norms grant men authority while relegating women to subordinate roles. This study explores these themes through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, which critiques the systemic objectification and marginalization of women. It closely examines how these issues manifest in the life of Saleema, the protagonist, and the impact of patriarchal structures on her autonomy and identity. Saleema's experiences reveal a stark reality: women are often perceived as less significant than men and are expected to conform to their desires and expectations. Her life is shaped by male-dominated influences, forcing her to navigate the intersecting challenges of poverty and societal constraints that limit her ability to make independent decisions. These restrictions exemplify the broader struggles faced by women in similar sociocultural contexts. This research underscores the importance of analyzing literature from a feminist perspective to uncover the deeply rooted gender inequalities that persist in society. Saleema's lived experiences provide a microcosm of the marginalization and commodification of women, shedding light on the broader systemic issues of sexism and oppression. The significance of studying Saleema lies in its capacity to challenge the normalized depiction of women in literature. Stories like this serve as critical tools for examining how literature can either perpetuate or critique entrenched gender standards. By scrutinizing such narratives, we gain valuable insights into the enduring forms of gender-based inequities and the necessity of addressing them within both literary and societal contexts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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