

Feminist Stylistic Analysis of Haider's Novel *How it Happened*

Abstract

Women have been marginalized and stereotyped in society, media, and books for decades. This study aims to conduct a feminist stylistic analysis of Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel How It Happened to determine the way women are portrayed as stereotyped objects in a sexist culture. Sara Mills' model of feminist stylistics has been used to conduct the study. The analysis of the study reveals that gender stereotypes are constructed by both the genders, which raises complexities for them. In Pakistani society, stereotypical roles performed by females create difficulty for other women in their surroundings. The analysis reveals certain instances from the novel when the protagonist of the novel, who is a female, expresses sexist remarks against other females. Such issues can only be addressed if women take initiative and create awareness about their rights and status within the society.

Key words: *Feminist Stylistic Analysis, Female Suppression, Gender Stereotypes, Female Marginalization, Novel.*

INTRODUCTION

Female marginalization has prevailed in the eastern society for decades due to which women have led oppressed lives. Officially, it was during the women's movement of the 1960s that the concept of "Feminism" emerged in Pakistan and women demanded the right of justified representation. With the passage of almost half a century, unconventional role of women is still not socially accepted in our society. Gender discrimination is quite common throughout the world as sons are considered to be superior to daughters. Even in modern societies like Confucian society, when a male child is born, he is taught all the necessary survival skills and basic education, whereas a female child is just kept inside the house and is taught household chores (Guisso, 1981, p.58). The focal point of this study is to highlight the stereotypical role played by women in contemporary Pakistani society and how these roles play a significant part in the lives of other women.

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Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- To identify the gender-specific words, phrases, and sentences used by different female characters in the novel that highlight the presence of gender (female) stereotyping.
- To identify female stereotypes present in Pakistani society as presented by Shazaf Fatima Haider in her novel, *How it Happened*.
- To present possible solutions for reducing stereotypical representation of females within contemporary Pakistani society as depicted in the selected text.

Research Questions

- How has Shazaf Fatima Haider raised the issue of gender stereotyping through her novel, *How it Happened*?
- How can Sara Mills' model of feminist stylistics be applied to Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel *How it Happened*?
- What are the possible solutions for reducing the stereotypical representation of females in the selected text?

Significance of the Study

This study is aimed at highlighting all the sexist and gender-stereotypical words, phrases, and sentences used by Shazaf Fatima Haider in her novel, *How it Happened*. The study has been conducted with the help of Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics model. Stylistic analysis is a model that translates and interprets the text in a general way but feminist stylistics allows us to study the text according to the way the text talks about women, especially by women. This study adopts feminist stylistics as a model in order to study Shazaf Fatima Haider's novel and interpret the different ways in which the author represents women in a sexist manner or conforms to the gender stereotypical representation of a female. The study holds grave significance as it highlights the ways through which women are stereotyped and oppressed in Pakistani society and presents recommendations that can help in controlling this oppression and stereotyping of females.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in nature. The novel selected for the study has been studied using the theoretical framework proposed by Sara Mills in her book *Feminist Stylistics*. Feminist Stylistics is the branch of stylistics that studies gender concerns in the form of encoded texts. Feminist stylistics studies "gender concerns" in language

with different perspectives with one of these perspectives involving gender while the others focus on feminism. The credit for the theory of “feminist stylistics” is usually given to Mills because even though she was not the one to introduce this concept, she has made a detailed contribution to this field. According to Mills, merging the terms of “feminist” and “Stylistics” can bring hopeful results (Montoro,2014, p.347).

The method of analysis is divided into three different levels where analysis of the text has been conducted at word level, phrase or sentence level, and at discourse level. The first part of the model focuses on gender discrimination by analyzing the words present within the text. The second part of the model focuses on studying the sentences that represent female writings. Sara Mills' model of feminist stylistics analyzes sentences or phrases that are sexist or demeaning towards females. In the third phase of her model, Sara Mills introduces the wider-scale analysis by analyzing discourse structures. According to the definition provided by Simpson and Carter (1989), discourse analysis not only focuses on the micro-contexts of the words, phrases, sentences, and conversations but it also focuses on the macro-contexts involving social patterns on a wider scale. In simple words, the feminist stylistic analysis of text at discourse level analyses the textual patterns by linking words and phrases to the “larger notion of ideology” (Mills, 2003, p.123).

Theoretical Framework

This study is of grave significance as it aims to highlight the gender stereotyping revealed by a female author through her female characters. Sara Mills' feminist stylistics highlights this gender stereotyping in the context of words, phrases, and discourses present in different literary texts. Sara Mills' model of feminist stylistics is one approach through which one can highlight the sexist, oppressive, and derogatory content written against women. Even though, Stylistics is a theoretical model of linguistics, used for the purpose of analyzing the “language of literary texts” Sara Mills (1995) introduced the notion of “Feminist Stylistic Analysis” where Stylistics was not only used for the purpose of detecting sexism within the content but also for the purpose of analyzing a particular point of view, metaphor, or agency interlinked with the issue of gender (Montoro,2014, p.347). Mills has discussed her model of feminist stylistics from two different perspectives i.e. the perspective of the “production” and the perspective of “reception” (Mills, 2003, p.22). She claims that there are certain factors that encourage the production of sexist text. For instance, in some societies there are certain discourse and language constraints, literary conventions, author's affiliation with society, sociological factors, and the influence of the publishers; all of which can impact the way a certain text is produced (Mills, 2003, p.22, 23 & 24). On the other hand, a text's reception is influenced by the intended audience and the audience that actually buys the book (Mills, 2003, p.24).

Sara Mills also argues the significance of this model in her book by claiming that this model can help a critic perceive sexist text in a way that cannot be perceived through the “traditional code model” since the scope of “traditional code model” is so limited that it is not possible to detect the reasons for the production of the sexist text through it. Secondly, if the author has used sexist terminology in the text, the traditional model shifts the entire blame on the author without studying the text in the broader context. Lastly, the traditional model views the reader as an isolated entity instead of viewing him as a member of a specific group (Mills, 2003, p.25). Due to the broad spectrum of Sara Mills’ model and its direct relation with gender stereotyping, we have applied it to Shazaf Fatima Haider’s novel “How it Happened”. In one of her interviews, Shazaf Fatima Haider talked about how she was surrounded by strong women throughout her life and felt quite devastated at the fact that the strong women surrounding her were responsible for reinforcing gender stereotypes. The character of Dadi in her novel “How it Happened” is also inspired by one such strong woman in her life. She also revealed during the interview that “How it Happened” is her response to every “boy and his mother” who entered her house to seek the hand of one of her three sisters (“Reality is [definitely] stranger than fiction – Shazaf Fatima Haider”, 2019).

Originally published in 2012, *How It Happened* became a debut novel for Shazaf Fatima Haider. The novel received high acclaim at national and international level. “How it Happened” (2013) revolves around the gender discrimination that occurs inside a Shia Bandian family when their daughter tries to marry a boy belonging to the family of a different religious sect. The novel starts with Dadi’s (grandmother’s) narration of the stories related to her youth and other young women belonging to her family. Dadi narrates stories to her granddaughters and through this apparently harmless gesture, she strives hard to pass on the message that love marriage is not allowed in this family as Bandian women have always engaged in arranged marriages. The entire story is narrated by the 15-year-old Saleha who is the youngest member of the Bandian family. Two major dramas take place during the entire story. The first one arises when Dadi’s only grandson Haroon who is Zaiba and Saleha’s brother, comes back from the United States after completing his education. Since he is highly educated and has reached the age of marriage, Dadi starts searching for a suitable girl for him. The most amusing thing is that Dadi becomes so dedicated towards finding the perfect wife for her grandson that she prepares an entire checklist of what the girl should look like or what traits her prospective daughter-in-law should possess.

According to Dadi’s checklist, her prospective daughter-in-law must be a complete female, she must not be a homosexual, she must be a pious virgin, she must be qualified enough to get a job but she must not want to do a job (Haider, 2013, p. 32). During the drama of Bahu-hunting (searching for daughter-in law), Dadi takes

Haroon to visit six different girls. All of them get rejected on the basis of different reasons. Finally, after getting exhausted due to this bride-hunt, Haroon decides to reveal his inner-most feelings to Dadi and his sisters about a girl called Saima who works at his office. At first, Dadi is shocked upon the revelation that her beloved grandson is dating a girl under her nose. Then she becomes suspicious about the piety of the girl her grandson is willing to marry. Finally, she gives in and decides to visit the girl's family upon insistence from her granddaughters and an offer of bribe from her grandson.

The second drama arises when Zeba Aapa is caught on a date with a boy in a Café. Dadi herself sees Zeba and drags her back to the house in a humiliating manner. Prior to this incident, Dadi tries really hard to get Zeba married into the family but she rejects all the proposals on the grounds of being unsuitable. However, when Dadi sees Zeba into the café, she instantly realizes the reason behind Zeba Aapa's denial. When Dadi and the family learn that the boy Zeba is dating is in fact a Sunni boy, a huge war begins but the turn of events finally force Dadi to show her willingness for Zeba's marriage. Zeba leads a very happy life after marriage but the entire chaos that is raised in the family due to her marriage with a Sunni boy makes it evident that in Pakistani society, getting married according to your own will is harder for women in comparison to men. When Dadi's grandson decides to get married to the girl of his choice, she objects but eventually agrees to the marriage. On the other hand, when it is her granddaughter's turn, she not only creates havoc but also publicly humiliates her granddaughter.

The analysis of the novel through the application of Sara Mills' model of Feminist Stylistics highlights the sexist attitude and gender discrimination that is experienced by Pakistani women at the hands of other Pakistani women. Even though women belonging to other parts of the world usually get stereotyped by men but in countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, gender stereotyping is a fairly common habit of the elderly or dominating women of the family.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION:

In the first part of her model, Sara Mills has referred to gender discrimination as "Sexism". According to the definition provided by Mary Vetterling-Braggin, a text or statement can be considered sexist if it causes female oppression. Even though, Sara Mills agrees with this definition of sexism, she thinks that this definition is quite limited so she has presented another definition of sexism. According to her, a statement will be regarded as sexist if it initiates or promotes an unfair distinction between the sexes (Mills, 2003, p.63). At the start of the novel, the word "Bandians" has been used repeatedly by the Dadi to refer to her pious family which was established when a Sufi saved the life of a local medicine man and in return, the medicine man gave the hand of his daughter in matrimony to the Sufi. After the

marriage, the Sufi became the first-ever “Bandian” of Bhakuraj. Thus “Bandian” is a Generic pronoun that generally referred to men throughout the novel. Although Dadi uses the word to introduce her family but it can easily be understood that the word “Bandian” refers to the men in her family. There is one more example of a generic pronoun on the first page of the novel “The Bandians of Bhakuraj, true to their ancestral heritage, married not for love” (Haider, 2013, p.1). In this sentence, the use of word “Bandians” seems to refer to both women and men of the Bandian family in the context of the story but the way it has been used, the readers will perceive that the word “Bandians” simply refers to the men of this family. Not only Dadi but other female characters also contribute to this sexism. For instance, when the entire family goes to Saima’s house to seek a proposal for Haroon, Saleha’s mother asks Saleha her opinion regarding Saima. In response to her mother’s query, Saleha claims that Saima was really “pretty” as she had a “nice nose” and “lovely eyes” (Haider, 2013, p.64). Saleha’s words clearly indicate that our society has become so superficial that it only judges women on the basis of their beauty.

The model proposed by Sara Mills studies sexism in different types of words including the generic pronouns, generic nouns, gender-specific terms used for women, insult terms used for women, gender-free terms, euphemistic terms, insulting names for female body parts and the derogation of females through semantics. Numerous sexist words have also been used in the novel. At the start of the novel, while narrating the incidents of her youth to her granddaughters, the narrator tells the reader that Dadi was considered to be a “veritable spinster” in the days of her youth because she was late in getting married (Haider, 2013, p.1). The word “spinster” refers to an old unmarried woman and using such a word for a woman who has not been able to get married early is entirely negative. It is not only sexist terminology but it might also incur a negative effect on all those women that are reading the text and are past their conventional age of marriage. Sara Mills also refers to the theory of linguistic determination that has been presented by Sapir and Whorf. According to this theory, the difference in the structure of languages incurs a strong impact on the way different societies perceive this world (Mills, 2003, p.63). Thus the way Dadi uses derogatory terms for over-aged unmarried women also contributes towards shaping stereotypes for such women.

According to Sara Mills, sexist words can incur different effects on the women, one of the effects is that it can pressurize women into viewing themselves in a negative or stereotypical manner (Mills, 2003, p.72). Dadi also uses certain other sexist words when she tells her granddaughters about the reason behind her late marriage. She tells them that she was not “fair like milk” and that her complexion was like “old register paper”. She further claims that her face was “filled with spots” and that it was never “glowing” (Haider, 2013, p.2). Dadi’s sexist remarks towards her own personality make it evident that whether it is Pakistani society or any other part of the world, all

girls need to have a fair complexion and spotless skin if they want to get married on time otherwise they will be left alone. Such remarks are highly derogatory as the remarks of this kind are not used for men and it is never considered necessary for men to have a fair complexion or spotless skin. Also, men do not have to pass through the drama of getting married on time as soon as they become adults neither do they have to bear the trauma of feeling rejected by society if they are not married by a certain age.

The second part of the model focuses on studying the sentences that convey negative connotations regarding females. Sara Mills' feminist stylistics analyzes sentences or phrases that are sexist or demeaning towards women. For instance, if a little boy is afraid of jumping in the swimming pool, his parents usually tell him not to "act like a girl". This inference that the boy must not act like a girl is a sexist sentence. There are also certain sentences where women are portrayed by men in negative light because they do not live up to their societal expectations. Such sentences will also be considered sexist sentences (Mills, 2003, p.98). In the novel, when Haider introduces one of Dadi's daughters Fatima, Dadi claims "Oh ho, don't talk to me about Fatima. The devil possessed her the day her husband died" (Haider, 2013, p.72). Dadi passes these comments about her own daughter because she refused to live up to societal expectations after the death of her husband. Fatima who is known as "Fati Phupps" in the novel, refused to grieve for her husband because she felt happy and relieved that "she was in no danger of being pregnant" (Haider, 2013, p.72). Not only that, but she also "caused a scandal" by not waiting for her husband's dead body. Instead, she drove herself to her house on the day of her husband's death, took a bath and wore a red sari just to annoy her mother and her in-laws (Haider, 2013, p.73). Fati's presence in the novel symbolizes Pakistani society's behavior towards modern, career-oriented women who refuse to live life under the dominance of a man. Such women are either considered mad or are termed as women with loose morals.

Mills also introduces types of discriminatory sentences by quoting Samuel Johnson, "Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" (Mills, 2003, p.99). This phrase refers to the "women's capacities" and clearly describes women in the circumstances where they perform an act which is not within their area of expertise (Mills, 2003, p.99). Mills' example becomes more evident from the sentence used by Dadi when she asks Haroon about Saima's professional intentions after marriage. She tells Haroon that she has a problem with Saima "working" after marriage because "a woman who works has no time to be a wife and a daughter-in-law" (Haider, 2013, p.58). A similar situation occurs at Haroon's Baraat when Zeba is stopped by a plump woman who asks her where Zeba completed her education. When Zeba tells her that she studied from St. Joseph's Convent, the woman feels relieved that Zeba studied from an all girls' institute. She further tells Dadi about a girl she met who not only studied in co-

education but also had “three boyfriends already” (Haider, 2013, p.121). The behavior of this woman towards a girl studying in a co-education institute is a clear example of sexist behavior adopted by mature women towards young girls in Pakistani society. By demonstrating that Haroon completed his education from the US and Zeba studied at a local girls’ institute, Haider has also pointed towards the hypocritical behavior of our society.

Even though, metaphors are usually considered words, Mills has used them at the phrase level. She has described the significance of metaphors in feminist stylistics through Black’s (1979) quote, “metaphors are better regarded as systems of beliefs than as individual things” (Mills, 2003, p.105). There are various metaphors in the novel that tend to demonstrate sexism or portray women in a negative light. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Dadi narrates a story to her granddaughters that holds metaphorical significance in the novel. While narrating the famous tale of Raja Takhur Majhu, Dadi tells her nieces about a widow who was abused by her mother-in-law because she considered her to be the reason for her son’s death. When Raja appeared in the village, he saw a widow who was “making chappatis for her mother-in-law who treated her like a slave” (Haider, 2013, p.6). There are various widows residing in the society but not every one of them is treated like a slave so this sentence provides an alarming depiction of widowhood. Raja kidnaps the widow who returns after almost six months when she is expecting a child (Haider, 2013, p.6). In the first sentence, the author is talking about a widow leading an oppressed life, and in the second sentence; the widow has been portrayed as an “immoral” person who willingly runs away with the first man in sight.

According to Mills, there are certain sentences that tend to stereotype a female’s status in the society, for instance, the famous phrase “the way to man’s heart is through his stomach” is a sort of degrading thing for women as it specifies that the first and foremost responsibility of women is to keep their men happy by cooking delicious food for them (Mills, 2003, p.99). Sara Mills has pointed towards different types of sentences that could be regarded as sexist sentences such as ready-made phrases, presuppositions and inferences made by the author in the sentences, and degrading metaphors used to refer to female characteristics (Mills, 2003, p.105). When Dadi’s grandson Haroon shows his willingness to get married, Dadi prepares a complete checklist according to which she was going to search a girl for her grandson. Almost all the conditions present in this checklist are degrading and sexist. The first condition that “She must be fully female” (Haider, 2013, p.32) is aimed at degrading the woman because it ridicules their womanhood. In the checklist, Dadi also claims that the potential bride for her grandson must belong to a higher family. Dadi claims that “She absolutely MUST be a Syedda” (Haider, 2013, p.32) which is also meant to defame the girls that do not belong to this specific cast or family. In the very next sentence, Dadi claims that “We Bandians are Syeds and therefore we will

not despoil our blessed blood with the offspring of anyone less exalted” (Haider, 2013, p.32). Dadi shows extreme pride in this sentence and the fact that she is searching for a bride for her grandson by applying all these conditions puts all those women in distress who do not belong to Syed family or Bandian family.

The first element that is usually analyzed at the discourse level is the number of characters present in the text. The analysis of the characters involves the gender-specific description used to describe the personality of that character which is solely based on stereotypical notions. However, according to the stereotypical notions, women are mostly analyzed on the basis of their body parts (Mills, 2003, p.124). During their conversation, Dadi and Saleha give humiliating titles to each of the girls they met solely on the basis of their appearance. This act of Dadi and Saleha tells a lot about the psychological approach of different societies towards women as body-shaming is a commonly-followed approach throughout the world. The first girl that they went to meet had a thick line of hair across her forehead. She could have been suffering from any type of hormonal issue but Saleha brutally criticized her looks by claiming that the girl “should have taken some pains to fix her face” (Haider, 2013, p.41) as the guests were coming to see her. Even Dadi clearly rejected the girl because of her facial hair growth and claimed that so much hair growth is not good for her great-grandchildren.

The second element that usually helps in analyzing the text at the discourse level is fragmentation which refers to the description of a woman by dividing her into separate anatomical parts. This strategy has been derived from pornographic content where the female body is fragmented through the male gaze. This technique is also being used in literature (Mills, 2003, p.133). In the novel under study, a girl is rejected by Haroon and Zeba because she is extremely young in comparison to Haroon. However, Dadi falls in love with the girl due to her “Good breasts and hips” (Haider, 2013, p.42) because they reminded her of her own younger self. In another place, even though Dadi is impressed due to the girl's religious interests but she passes insulting comments due to her fair complexion and extra-tall height. Dadi's comments “She's fair so will look good in black. A little monstrously tall. Perhaps she could stand next to Haroon so I can make sure she's not taller than him” (Haider, 2013, p.43) are quite insulting and stereotypical. Saleha also mocks the girl's healthy body by claiming that “She could carry a dozen alams-what muscles she has!” (Haider, 2013, p.43). Dadi and Saleha's analysis of the girl's appearance makes it evident that not only men but women also analyze other women by dividing them into separate anatomical parts instead of viewing them as complete human beings.

Gender Stereotyping is a common element of the Eastern society and is quite prevalent in Pakistan. Girls and boys are differentiated on the basis of their future social roles right from the moment of their birth. As a boy is considered to be the future bread-winner of the family so he is provided with more love, care, liberty, and

opportunities in comparison to a girl who is considered a financial burden. However, this is not the only type of stereotyping that women experience in Pakistani society. They are stereotyped on the basis of their looks, on the basis of their social status and especially on the basis of their marital status. Shazaf Fatima Haider has tried to cover all these issues in her novel through the characters of Dadi, Saleha, Zeba, Haroon, Saima, Fati Phupps, and Saleha's parents. Even though the ratio of gender stereotyping demonstrated by Dadi is high but as the novel proceeds, it becomes evident that some of the other characters such as Saleha, Haroon, Saima, and Qurrat Dadi also take part in this stereotyping.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the analysis of the selected text, it is concluded that even in contemporary society, women are marginalized on the basis of their gender, looks and social status not just by men but also by women. On the other hand, men are considered to be superior to women in all aspects. The most depressing aspect is that in most cases women are oppressed by other women. For instance, in Haider's novel, Dadi herself is a woman who has seen various issues in her life before and after marriage because she was entangled in an arranged marriage with a person she barely knew. Still, when it comes to her granddaughters, Dadi does not allow them to marry according to their own will and prevents them from doing so by narrating stories from her own past and of the other girls who married according to their own will and then met a depressing fate. Dadi not only marginalizes her own granddaughters but she also considers her grandson to be beyond all the family rules and regulations because when he wants to marry the girl he likes, Dadi readily agrees.

Dadi not only shows gender discrimination but she also shows a sexist attitude towards different girls that she visits while seeking a perfect bride for her grandson. The comments that she passes on the physical appearance of the girls are insulting and humiliating. Dadi's comments symbolize the fact that even in contemporary society when human beings have made technological advancement, the only thing people seek in girls is a delicate figure and fair complexion. One of the most significant points that emerges from this study is that men are not the only ones to stereotype women; women also play an important and pivotal part in stereotyping and oppressing other women. This oppression, by women and of women, can only be reduced if they recognize their responsibility towards society and take the initiative towards social awareness for the construction of an educated and enlightened society.

Shazaf Fatima Haider, through this work, portrays the stereotypical representation in Pakistani society. This work can also be studied from other perspectives. It can be beneficial in studying the norms of arranged marriages in Pakistani culture. The author makes use of Roman-English mashup which can also be studied through linguistic analysis. The elements of imagery, wit, and humor which have been used

by the author may also be brought into investigation in future researches. The analysis of the selected work helps us to understand that even small groups of people can change the world. Sometimes words from a woman in the family may make or break another woman. The women you know are changing the world, you do your best when you improvise while composing a life and a career that matters, and often by encouraging each other. The change in our approach of empowering women around us may help in creating a healthy and open social circle.

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