

The Life of Women in Rural Sindh: A Critical Analysis of Fahmida Raiz's short Story *The Daughters Of Aai* from the Perspective of Cixous's Eriture Feminism



Muhammad Ilyas Khan	Department of English, National University of Modern Languages Peshawar Campus, KP, Pakistan. ilyaskhanpak642@gmail.com
Sulaiman Ahmad	Lecturer in English, National University of Modern Languages Peshawar Campus, KP, Pakistan. sulaimanahmad@numl.edu.pk
Khushnood Arshad	Department of English, National University of Modern Languages Peshawar Campus, KP, Pakistan. Khushnoodarshad566@gmail.com

Abstract: *This qualitative research aims to analyze Fahmida Raiz's short story *The Daughters of Aai* in the light of Helene Cixous's *Ecriture Feminine* (1975). The theory recommends various characteristics for a feminist literature, including female author, writing about women's issues and sexuality within the text, as well as describing female body parts and processes related to their body. To explore the elements of the theory in the short story, the researchers collected data from the text. After comparing it with the theory, the researchers concluded that the short story serves as a faithful illustration of the theory because it adheres to conditions required for a feminist literature. The researchers observed that the short story's author is a female, Fahmida Raiz, who addresses women's issues in rural Sindh through different characters in the short story. Firstly, Aai experiences considerable hardships in her life, juggling multiple tasks such as hard labor, looking after seven children and managing a drug-addicted husband. Secondly, Fatimah falls victim to sexual harassment and unwanted pregnancies. Lastly, Mumtaz grapples with forced marriage and lacks property rights to her late husband's inheritance. Furthermore, the paper noticed a departure from usual linguistic norms of the Pakistani society, as the writer explicitly describes breasts, menstruation, pregnancy, and abortion in the short story.*

Keywords: Helene Cixous, *Ecriture Feminine*, Fahmida Raiz, *The Daughters of Aai*

Introduction

Feminism is a social-political and economic movement that advocates for equal rights and opportunities for women. Unfortunately, gender inequality persists in the male dominant societies, where men are considered superior to women and thus

exploits the women. Consequently, in a patriarchal societies, women remain deprived of their fundamental rights such as educational, political, social and economic rights. Furthermore, they also face issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, forced marriages and honor

killing. Feminism emerged as a response to these injustices. The term “Feminism” was first coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier (1772-1837) in 1837. The movement subsequently spread to the rest of the world.

Pakistan is one of the patriarchal states where women encounters issues such as gender inequality, rapes, unwanted marriages, honor killing, and no proper access to educational and medical facilities. However, the situation tends to be better in urban areas but remains pathetic in rural parts. There are many institutions, activists and writers who raise their voices for the suppressed women in the country, such as Fatima Bhutto, Uzma Aslam Khan, Muneeza Shamsie, Bina Shah and Fahmida Raiz. The researchers have taken a feminist short story, *The Daughter of Aai* (2007) by Fahmida Raiz, and are analyzing it with the feminist theory of Helene Cixous, *Ecriture Feminine*.

Helene Cixous is a French feminist, political activist, humanitarian, theorist, playwright, essayist and novelist. She was born in French-occupied Oran, Algeria and brought up there. In 1955, she moved to France. During early stages of her life the philosopher witnessed the World War II, colonialism and Algerian war of independence. All of these events have influenced her thoughts, which reflects in her writing. The writer debuted her literary career after the novel, *Dedans (Inside)* (1969) and then authored more than forty books and 100 essays. The novelist is known for her leading role in French Feminism of 20th century, alongside Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. The feminist introduced the theory *Ecriture Feminine*, which means feminine writing. The term *Ecriture Feminine* first appeared in one of her essays, *Le Rire de la Medusa*, published in 1975. Paula Cohen and Keith Cohen

translated the essay into English language and entitled it *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976).

In her theory, Cixous urges that the writing is phallogentric in nature. Women are often discouraged in writing, as they are in many activities across the world. In this patriarchal world, women lack a platform to express themselves. They are portrayed as dangerous, dark passive and indeterminate in the texts. Though there are some female writers, but their numbers are few, and their perspectives about women mirror male authors. Cixous establishes a framework for the liberation of subjugated gender, states, “Woman must write about herself: must write about woman and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (Cohen and Cohen, 1976, P.875). The theorist asks women to write in order to get freedom, recognizing writing as an influential channel through which women can break the chains of suppression. Furthermore, the theory instructs the female authors to write the sufferings of women and to protest against their suppression in the texts. Cixous also asserts that language, controlled by the dominant class, deprives from the discussions about sexual parts and process related to the female body, as theorist says “you can’t talk about female sexuality” (Cohen and Cohen, 1976, p.876). The theory invites women to challenge this tradition and describe their bodies in the writing, “woman must put herself into the text” (Cohen and Cohen, 1976, p.875). Considering these parameters for feminist writing, this research analyzes the short story *The Daughters of Aai* (2007) by Raiz Fahmida.

Fahmida Raiz (1945-2018), was an Urdu poet, feminist, and an advocate of human rights. She was born in the city of Meerut, India, in 1945. After the partition of Indian

Sub-continent, she migrated to Hyderabad, Pakistan. Raiz started her literary career at very young age and gained prominent status in Pakistani literature. The writer wrote about harsh and unspoken realities of the society, and criticized government policies. Pakistan has a male dominant society where the lives of the women are miserable. Raiz based her writing on these issues and wrote with a strong voice that none of the contemporary female writers dared to use in Pakistan. She challenged the patriarchy and the so-called Eastern norms that confine women to the four walls. Furthermore, the writer shattered stereotypes by openly discussing the topics that were considered taboo for a female to discuss, such as womanhood, pregnancy, menstruation, sex and rapes. Consequently, her bold and unspoken writing led her to imprisonment and exile from the country. The feminist began her literary career at the age of fifteen in 1963 with the poem *Funoon*, and published her first poem collection, *Pathar Ki Zaban (The Tongue of Stone)* (1967). After that, the writer authored a large number of literary works throughout her career, including *Badan Dareeda (The Lacerated of Body)* (1973), *Adhura Aadmi Incomplete Man* (1986), *Aadmi Ke Zindagi (The Life of Man)* (1999), *Zinda Bahar Lane* (2000), *Reflections in a Cracked Mirror* (2001), and *Godavari* (2008). The list of her publications is extensive, this paper only focuses on one of her short stories, *The Daughter of Aai* (2007).

The short story depicts the pathetic lives of women in rural Sindh, Pakistan. The narrator of the short story is Raiz's sister, Shahbano, who is married to a landowner in rural Sindh. The characters in the short story struggle to find happiness in their lives, reflecting the harsh realities of the society. Raiz holds men responsible for the difficult circumstances faced by women in

the village, they work seven days a week in the fields in addition to their domestic duties. One of the characters, Aai, has seven children, but her husband is a drug addict who does no work. As a result the wife not only looks after her children but also does hard labor. Fatima, the protagonist of the short story, gets raped by an unknown character, which results in two pregnancies. The village women decides to have an abortion for the first time, but their efforts are late for abortion in the second pregnancy. Mumtaz Begum, the second wife of a landlord named Noor Muhammad Shah, takes the baby from her to claim the inheritance of her late husband. The poor Fatimah at a very young age, experiences the pain of pregnancy, abortion and delivery. Mumtaz, who belongs to a poor family, is also experiences male dominance. Despite being young and beautiful, she is married to an old landlord who has wife and children. Her parents could not refuse the proposal due to fear of the landlord. Even after becoming the widow, Mumtaz struggles her property rights, facing denial from landlord's first wife and sons regarding her share in the property of her late husband. Throughout the short story, the female characters facing different facets of suffering in the village.

Problem Statement

Riaz uses unconventional and outspoken language in the short story to discuss women and their body. The departure from the established norms of the language attracts researchers to apply the theory *Ecriture Feminine*, which asserts the same requirements for a feminist literature. Furthermore, the short story possesses other elements of the theory, such as addressing women and their issues.

Research Objectives

1. To hunt out various elements of Cixous's *Ecriture Feminine* present in Raiz's short story *The Daughters of Aai* (2007).

Research Questions

1. What are the features of Cixous's *Ecriture Feminine* in Raiz's *The Daughter of Aai*?

Significance of the study

The paper will enable the readers to understand feminist theory of Cixous, *Ecriture Feminine*. Furthermore, it will introduce the readers to the well-known Pakistani feminist writer, Fahimda Riaz. Most importantly, it will shed light on the status of women and their sufferings in the male dominant society of rural Sindh.

Delimitations

The short story carries multiple themes like Child abuse, feudalism and honor killing, but this paper focuses on the elements of *Ecriture Feminine* within the short story.

Literature Review

To ensure the authenticity of the paper, the researchers studied the previous works about theory and the short story.

Jones (1985) argues that Cixous resists phallogentric mindset that has historically confined women to the role of a sexual object for the man, prohibiting them from expressing their sexuality. She encourages woman to establish a counter discourse through new language to oppose phallogentrism practically, not just in theory. Cixous then suggests strategies for female writing. First, it should begin with their sexuality. Second, it needs to deconstruct the mistaken representation of woman by the society and language. Besides, it ought to draw the real representation of woman for the recreation of the world. Furthermore, the writer

considers Woman's unconscious different from that of man. Lastly, the feminist criticizes psychoanalysis for its sexual segregation, and considers woman's sexuality superior to man's mentality.

Aneja (1992) discusses Cixous's concept of establishing a platform where a woman can freely write about their own forbidden bodies. Cixous invites women to explore their repressed sexualities and participate in the writing beyond the limitations of phallogentric discourse, which have kept them away from their own bodies. The theorist perceives no liberation for women in binary structure and disagrees with this notion. Instead, the Feminist recommends *Ecriture Feminine* as an alternate for phallogentric writing. Women can overcome repression and reclaim their identity through language. Lastly, they can achieve a goal of political status in the society.

According to Crawford (2006), Cixous seeks liberty from repression through expression. Through *Ecriture feminine*, Cixous opposes the traditional, patriarchal forms of writing. For societal change, it is mandatory to first disrupt the existing norms of the language. The theorist suggests that disruptive writing in both form and content is necessary, and it calls women to reject all the existing norms, including binary oppositions like Man/woman, linear argumentation, genre, grammar and syntax. Furthermore, the theorist argues that it is important for a newly born woman to express all about woman that have been repressed, through *Ecriture Feminine*.

Chakraborty (2013), found in her research that by using Medusa as metaphor Cixous challenges the oppressive phallogentric structure by introducing a unique form of writing through her theory, *Ecriture*

feminine. The theorist attempts to bring female authority in a patriarchal community and responds to the female oppression in the Post-structuralist society. Moreover, the theory invites women to describe female body and sexuality in manner that defies the coded and theoretical representation. Lastly, she deconstructs Jacques Lacan's phallocentrism and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories, while seeking to liberate all repressed desires and instincts within women.

Vachhani (2019) conducted qualitative research to examine *Ecriture Feminine*. She came up with the conclusion that the politics of writing is varies for teaching, researching and about organizations. The research emphasis a need to expose phallocentrism in writing. Furthermore, it explores suppress and hidden possibilities, creating a room for feminist politics that are often invisible in language.

Rind, Sangi and Goping(2017) analyzed the short story *The Daughters of Aai* through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "field" (1986,1990).According to their paper, the short story depicts the plight, innocence, abuse and resourcefulness of women in rural Sindh, Pakistan. The researchers found that there are two classes in the village: poor villagers and landlords. The poor class is further subdivided into men and women. Additionally, the women of the village are portrayed as saving Fatimah from the dominant class, which molests other women but they themselves do not tolerate a single world for their own women. Further, the analysis shows that honor killing is the common practice in the village often leads to tribal fights that may last for decades.

Zeb, Shahriar and Umrani (2017) conducted a qualitative analysis of the short

story *The Daughter of Aai*(2007), by applying the subaltern theory of Ranajit Guha and Gayatari Spivak. The paper considered factors like gender, age, class and lawlessness as responsible for of the subjugation of women rural Sindh. Furthermore, it says that women are made subaltern through domestic colonialism, which regards them as "others". Finally, the paper demands the restoration of women identity in the province.

Research Methodology

The researchers have adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to conduct this paper. It extracts relevant characters, events and sentences from the short story, *The Daughters of Aai*(2007) and describes them with the help of Cixous's *Ecriture Feminine*.

Theoretical framework

The researchers are conducting this paper in the light of *Ecriture Feminine* suggested by the French feminist, Helene Cixous. She used the term in her famous essay *Le Rire de la Medusa* (1975). After a year, Paula Cohen and Keith translated the essay into English language. They renamed it *The Laugh of the Medusa*.(1976).

The theory responses to the false representation of the female in western feminist discourses. It offer a strategies to the misrepresented class in the society, encouraging them to use their language to deconstruct these discourses. The theorist argues that if women want status in the society, they must write for herself. It suggests a framework for a feminist writing. This paper takes three parameters of female writing proposed by the theory and applies them to Raiz's *The Daughters of Aai*(2007). First, the author should be "female". Second, the writers needs to write about other women in the text. Lastly, the writers must describe female sexual

bodies' parts and processes related to their bodies.

Content analysis

Cixous, being a pioneer of French feminism of the late twentieth century, contributes to the feminist discourse by introducing her own theory, *Écriture Feminine*. She attributes the subjugation of women to their limited writing and argues that men prevent women to write because it scares them. The theory considers the language as a weapon through which women can achieve liberation. To assert their status in the society, women need to use language to deconstruct the phallogentric discourses in the text. The theorist proposes different features for a feminist literature. A feminist author must adhere those component to write a feminist literary works. To dig out those elements in the short story, the researchers analyzed the text of the short story *The Daughter of Aai*(2007) and collected data for the features of the theory. The paper discusses them in succession.

Human's genders possess different traits. For instance, women have diverse sex, sentiments, desires, issues and complex biological characteristics related to their body. Unfortunately, being a dominant class in the society, men control the language. Despite their differences and lack of knowledge about female bodies, men still write and prevent women to write themselves. Phallogentric ego remains a dominant factor in their writing. While writing a text, men portray women as a weak creation as compared to men. However, there are female activists who advocates for women but it their effort are minimal and powerless to encounter the strong Phallogentric discourse.

Cixous proposes a solution by asking women to write themselves. Thus, the first

point of analysis is the author, which needs to be a female as per the demands of the theory. Fahmida Raiz(1946-2018), an advocate of female rights, authors the short story *The Daughter of Aai*(2007). As a staunch supporter of gender equality in Pakistani society, Raiz demands rights for women with a strong voice and outspoken language which no other woman activist has done in Pakistan. As a prominent name in Pakistani literature, she rejects patriarchy and societal norms in her works. Furthermore, the feminist deviates from the so-called linguistic norms that are biased against women and openly discusses women, and their sexuality, unlike any other contemporary female author. In the short story, she rejects the patriarchy and phallogentric discourse, and openly discusses women's issues, and accuses males of making the life difficult for women in the rural Sindh, Pakistan. Raiz narrates the story through her sister, Shahbano, who is wife of a landowner. Finally, the researchers found that both the narrator and writer in the short story are females.

Cixous believes in women's unity because it is their gender that men exploits women all across world, irrespective of their race, nationality or religion. The theorist motivates women to fight collectively as a gender, thus presenting the second aspect of her theory by appealing female writers to address women's issues and sexuality in the text. As they share a common gender and familiar with the issues, they can express women better than male writers.

Raiz being a resident of Sindh province, concerns women's sufferings in her province. In the short story, she depicts the harsh lives of women in the rural Sindh, highlighting basic and serious women's issues such as physical labor, sexual harassment, undesired pregnancy, forced

marriage, and no rights to the property of father and husband. The writer highlights the sufferings through different characters in the short story. The paper discusses it one by one.

First, Aai, through her character, Raiz portrays the miserable life of a woman in rural Sindh. The character illustrates how much difficult it is to be a woman and mother in the male dominant society. With seven children and a drug addict husband, she performs multiple tasks, not only household but also works outside in the fields along with other women from the village to feed her children. As the writer says "Hard physical labor had kept her fit".(Raiz,2007,P.32). Riaz exposes the reality that although men consider women as a weak creation but women carry out various tasks such hard labor, domestic works, bear childbirth and childcare. Additionally, saving a raped girl in a society where honor killing is daily ritual isn't an easy task to accomplish. Through her determination, Aai not only saves Fatimah from honor killing but also protects her health. She doesn't even let the men know about the pregnancies and handles it without the support of even her husband.

In a patriarchal society, females are often considered as mere objects for sexuality. Sexual exploitation remains a significant issue for women in Pakistan. Hundreds of women get rapes annually in the country, and despite being the victims, women are often blamed due to the system, religion and social norms are that favor men. Raiz portrays this issue through Fatimah, the protagonist of the short story. As Fatimah enters puberty, an unknown character rapes her which results in pregnancy "Fatimah is pregnant".(Raiz, 2007, P.34) Despite her innocence, she faces the blame, even the mother beats her "Aai had beaten Fatimah

mercilessly".(Raiz,2007,P.34). Unlike the demanding justice, her mother attempts to shield the pregnancy. To avoid honor killing, the village women decide to go for abortion, which spares Fatimah from honor killing but affects her health and most importantly, her culprit remains unpunished.

The tragedy befalls Fatimah again within the same year, as she gets another unwanted pregnancy, "Fatu was pregnant again".(Raiz, 2007, P.35). This time they discovered too late to go for abortion, seven months after the rape. Then a miracle happens for Fatimah when the landlord's widow named Mumtaz Begum (Mummo) requires a child to prove herself the wife of her late husband, Noor Muhammad Shah. Taking advantage, Mumtaz accommodates Fatimah and her mother in her house till delivery, only to take the child from them. Raiz exposes the dark side of males, revealing how they rape women. Besides, she criticizes landlords for exploiting the poor, as Mumtaz, being a member of the landlords, neglects Fatimah's pain of pregnancy and delivery, just for the sake of property.

In the patriarchal societies dominated by males, women are denied the right to choose their life partners. The majority of the marriages are decided by the families against the girl's wishes. Consequently, the girls live their whole life without experiencing happiness. Raiz challenges this mentality and criticizes it through Mumtaz in the short story. Although she was married to the landlord Noor Muhammad Shah, but it was against her will. Being young and beautiful, she married to an older man who already had sons a wife and sons, "a young girl from a poor family" (Raiz, 2007, P. 36).

She belongs to a poor family so the

parents, couldn't dare to reject the proposal of the landlord. Through the character, Raiz also advocates for another right for women, which is inheritance. Males deny the property rights of women in their father and husband inheritance. In the short story, after the death of the landlord, his first wife along and sons do not accept Mumtaz as a wife of their father. And tries to exclude her from the property. "but to deny Mumtaz Begum her inheritance they claimed that her marriage was never solemnized: she was merely the landlord's mistress" (Raiz,2007,P.36). This prompts Mumtaz to claim the illegitimate son of Fatimah as her own and asserts that he is the child of Noor Muhammad and her.

The paper delves into pivotal point of the theory: deconstruction of established language. Likemen, language is also prejudice regarding female gender. Writing, inherently biased, doesn't represent women. The male writers have relegated discussion about female's body parts to taboo status. Consequently, the literature lacks the discourse on female sexuality and even the natural bodily processes.

Cixous inspires females to challenge so-called linguistic norms and demands female writers to freely describe female body and biological phenomena in the text. Raiz, known for her rebellious nature, departs from normal language. This defiance grants her a notable status Pakistani literature. She openly addresses female's desires, sexuality and biological details, which are typically considered taboo in Pakistani society and its languages.

For instance, "breast", a biological organ in female body has been stigmatized by the society and its language. The term hardly appears in the texts. Raiz, as a nonconformist explicitly names the organ in the short story, notably in Aai's physical

description, "breasts jutting out of her kurta". (Raiz, 2007, P.32).And While describing post-pregnancy changes in Fatimah's body "her breasts ached horribly". (Raiz, 2007, P. 37)

Furthermore, the writer discusses various sexual and biological phenomena deemed unacceptable by society and language. For example, she challenges the negative portrayal of "Menstruation", emphasizing its biological importance. The writer adds that it isn't a taboo but it a natural process akin to the other bodily functions. Raiz discusses the menstruation of the protagonist in the short story. "Fatimah When she was fourteen Fatimah began to menstruate".(Raiz,2007, P. 33).Furthermore, she requests other women to help the new girls getting to the stage as the village's women helps Fatimah. "Aai and the other village women tried to teach her to use cotton pads" (Raiz, 2007, P.33)

Pregnancy, sacred biological stage is shunned by the society and its language. Despite its significance, discussions about pregnancy are discouraged, even within the family. Raiz, unlike other writers openly uses terms like "pregnant" and "pregnancy" in the short story. The writer describes Fatimah's pregnancy like "She was pregnant again."(Raiz, 2007, P.32). Besides, there is also a reference to another unwanted pregnancy in the text. "The last time an illegitimate pregnancy was discovered here, two clans had fought for a year" (Raiz, 2007, P.34)

Abortion another biological process, made taboo by the society. The process is even illegal in many countries. The decision to have a child falls solely on the woman, rather than, family, society or the system. Raiz explicitly addresses the term in short story. After getting pregnant, Fatimah's mother and other villagers decide to have

an abortion for an unwanted pregnancy. “It was decided quietly that the pregnancy be aborted at once” (Raiz, 2007, P.34). The same term reoccurs in the text. “she would first have an abortion” (Raiz,2007,P.35)

Conclusion

After the thorough study of the short story, the researchers concluded that Riaz’s short story truly reflects Cixous’s theory, thus categorizing it as a feminine writing. The readers can discern various features of the theory within the text. Firstly, the author is Fahimda Raiz, who is a female who writes various issues faced by women in rural Sindh. The researchers encounter no happy female character; rather men are depicted as responsible for the worst condition of the women. First Aai, married to a drug addict husband, works tirelessly to feed her seven children. Additionally, the protagonist becomes a victim of sexual harassment and unwanted pregnancies. Mumtaz, a young girl, a widow of older landlord with sons from the previous wife, faces challenges regarding her property rights her husband’s death. Throughout the analysis unusual language from the short story resurfaced. The text is rich with discussions about female body and process, including the breast, pregnancy menstruation and abortion.

REFERENCES

- Cixous, H., Cohen, K., & Cohen, P. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>
- Jones, A. R. (2013). Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture feminine. In *Feminist Criticism and Social Change (RLE Feminist Theory)* (pp. 86-101). Routledge.
- Aneja, A. (1992). The Medusa's slip: Hélène Cixous and the underpinnings of écriture féminine. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 4(1), 17-27.
- Crawford, A. S. (2006). Dis/Eruption: Hélène Cixous’s écriture féminine and the rhetoric of material idealism. *Feminismo/s*. N. 7 (jun. 2006); pp. 41-56.
- Chakraborty, D. (2013). Analyzing Ecriture Feminine in “The Laugh of the Medusa”. *European Academic Research*, 1(9), 2895-2904.
- Vachhani, S. J. (2019). Rethinking the politics of writing differently through écriture féminine. *Management Learning*, 50(1), 11-23.
- Rind, U. K., Sangi, M. K., & Gopang, N. (2017). RESOURCEFULNESS OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF BOURDIEU'S FIELD IN FEHMIDA RIAZ'S THE DAUGHTERS OF AAI. *The Women-Annual Research Journal of Gender Studies*, 9(9).
- Zaib, S., Shahriar, A., & Umrani, S (2017). A Critical Analysis of Riaz’s Story The Daughters of Aai from Subaltern Perspective.
- Riaz, F. 2007, The Daughter’s of Aai, (M. Shamsie, Ed.) Oxford, New York.