

Exploring the Oppression of Women in a Pakistani Novel *Unmarriageable* by Soniah Kamal



Nabeela Gul	Lecturer at Department of English, Qurtuba University Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Gulnabila353@gmail.com
Dr. Irfan Ali Shah	Professor at Department of English, Qurtuba University, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. irfanuop1@gmail.com
Sahibzadi Sidra tul Muntaha	MS English from International Islamic University Islamabad sahibzadisidratulmuntaha@gmail.com
Ifat Saba Burhan	M.Phil English Qurtuba University Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan ifatsababurhan@gmail.com

Abstract: *This research work has examined and explored the representation of women in Soniah Kamal, novel Unmarriageable by using the theoretical framework of Kate Millet's radical feminism. This theoretical framework sees that the patriarchal culture is fundamentally responsible for the oppression of women in Pakistani society. The present study by employing the text analysis method has explored that women in Pakistani society are marginalized and oppressed as they are forced for early marriages. This deprives them of the basic right of education. The protagonist sister Jane, who despite being born in an educated family suffers from the woes of early marriages which eventually becomes a barrier in her mental health, social life as well as her in her educational development. Though Alys the protagonist takes her sister as a life lesson and stand firm for her rights, by observing her sister's woes after her marriage. Early marriages resist social mobility of women in society. Soniah Kamal retells by strain and reflecting the story of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen by giving voice to the hopes, frustration and fears of Pakistani Women. In Pakistani society females are deeply marginalized by the patriarchal social system, crushed and scrambled between mental disorder and traditional norms. Their striving hard, as much as possible, to challenge social laws and get rid of the conventional rules of Pakistani society proves self-destructive. Facing discrimination based on gender, lack of educational rights, political and domestic oppression are some of the root causes of women woes in the current social context. Early marriages disrupt their education and damage their dreams, social mobility and security. Resultantly, Alys tends to make a difference by not surrendering herself to an imposed of early marriage and in turn, resort to completion of her education towards successful life. The implication is that early marriages are one of the main obstructions to women development in society.*

Keywords: Patriarchy, Radical Feminism, Marginalization, Suppression.

Introduction

Feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. According to Deborah Madsen (2000) "Feminism deals with women and their status in society and asks questions

about oppression, consciousness and gender".

The liberal feminism rose in the seventeenth centuries. Liberalism gives intensity for the equality rights in every field or provides them equal opportunity, independent and free to

decide their own future education. The feminist believe that democracy is naturally adaptable to equality for the women and men. Every human being is created with the same rights and every woman must have the same opportunity in developing their future and decisions. Liberal feminism is trying to make women and men equal. (65148, 2016).

Soniah Kamal, the Author

Soniah Kamal is a Pakistani- American writer.

She was born in Karachi, Pakistan and lived in England and Saudi Arabia. She is the author of the two novels, *An Isolated Incident* (2014) and *Unmarriageable* (2019). *Soniah Kamal* is an award-winning novelist, essayist and public speaker. *Sonia Kamal* in this artistic piece of work highlights the fact that women in 21st century are facing the same patriarchal culture and same problems in Pakistan as the heroines of Jane Austen faced in the early 18th century. The novel *Unmarriageable Pride and Prejudice in Pakistan* is simply a retelling of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the current Pakistani context. The setting of this novel is Lahore and Dilip Abad which is a small town in Pakistan. It highlights the problems of the traditional Pakistani society which women are facing even in the 21st century. This study will enlighten us with the social problems of Pakistani society. The story starts off with Alys Binat, second of the Binat daughters. She is a literature teacher. Alys Binat, an English literature teacher in an exclusive school, is 31 years old and very happily unmarried. Living in a small Pakistani town where, for women, marriage is the ultimate goal, her mother feels it is her life's duty to ensure all five of her daughters are well-married, including Alys. When an invitation to the wedding of the season arrives, Mrs. Pinkie Binat is overjoyed at the prospect of her daughters meeting so many men. Indeed, it does seem as if fate is smiling upon them as eldest, Jena, soon attracts the attention of Mr. Fahad "Bungles" Bingle, a most eligible bachelor.

She is presented as an independent women, one who believes in writing a part of her own destiny, carving her fate as per her own ways in life, thus being financially independent, Alys

have strong opinions against marriage as she reckons the idea of marriage having the only way for a woman to survive in society. Currently she is teaching the novel *Pride and Prejudice* to her class. Unfortunately, she teaches in a school where girls learn to be proper women and prepare them to be proper typical house wives in future. Many of her students get married before they complete their 12th grade. Alys (short for Alysba) is often admonished by the school principal for her independent, bold school of thoughts and is also being judged as well as lambasted by being looked down upon for her humble background. In addition to this the author gives us a detailed background of Binat family. The Binats were rich at one time. Their businesses were flourishing and they travelled the world. Before coming to Pakistan, they used to live in Saudi Arabia and used to spend holidays in USA and UK, study in international schools with multicultural people and had good exposure to the world. Alys' father was betrayed by his own brother, who in his absence transferred all businesses and properties to his name and left them with nothing. This resulted in serious losses to international leg of the business as well and they had no option left but to close it down and come back to Pakistan. When they arrived in Pakistan, they were told to fend for themselves and were graciously given a neglected, forlorn residential property in Dilipabad. Alys' father was an honorable kind man, backstabbed, disowned by his own bother, after which he took his family and settled in Dilipabad 10 years ago. His wife was an intelligent and supporting lady who gracefully managed her family consisting of her husband and five daughters and a household on her very own self.

Jena is the elder sister of Alyshba and is 32 while Alys is 30, looking these sisters getting aged, their mother is worried is on a solo mission i-e; to get them married to well settled, rich families with excellent lineage. When an invitation arrives to them for the most happening wedding of the season, Lady Binat is sure that this wedding will help them land suitors for her daughters. So, she sets upon herself to prepare for the wedding by making new dresses and

jewelry. This would put a massive dent on their monthly budget so it was agreed that dresses shall be customized by their tailor and imitation jewelry shall be bought from a trusted jeweler in Dilipabad. At the wedding, Binat sisters looked epitome of beauty and elegance in their non-designer clothes and Jena the eldest one managed to grab the interest of a wealthy bachelor, Fahad Bingla, famously known as Bungles. But as expected, his sisters Hammy and Sammy were ultimate snobs who looked down upon Dilipabad and its residents and were upset over Bungles' interest in Binat sister. At this wedding, we are also introduced to Valentine Darsee, who takes an instant dislike towards Binat family and the feeling is likewise at Alys's end as well. Unfortunately, Darsee has fallen for Alys. When they are brought together again at his aunt's estate in Lahore, he is compelled to propose marriage to Alys who, cognizant of the hurt he has caused her sister, rudely rejects him. When Darsee presses her for an explanation, Alys not only offers the hurt he has brought upon Jena, but the way in which he swindled his first cousin, Mr. Wickaam. The whole rishta culture portrayed throughout the book hits too close and is actual depiction of Pakistan. The book dives deeper into Pakistani culture reflecting how class, wealth and lineage are accounted for marriage and lack thereof perpetuates unavailability of proposals or rejections. However, I found a few things I disagree with which are not the norm of our culture in my opinion. Like Mrs. Binat sending out Jena to meet Bungles at his invitation to Polo Club and then the Binat sisters going out for new year night's party unchaperoned but with their parents' consent. I found secularism prevalent throughout the book.

Feminism is another strong side of this book. Alys is depicted as someone who doesn't let herself be defined by marriage only. This is what attracted Valentine Darsee towards her, who found Alys to possess sound sensibilities and also knew when to put him in his place. The protagonist of the novel is Alys Binet who is a fierce character who never hides her dislike for the traditional rules of society and she is always against these rules, like early marriages, hunt for

a rich husband, class differences, arrange marriages.

Data Analysis and Discussion Gender Inequality in Education in Pakistan

Sonia Kamal is a passionate reader of Jane Austen's novels. Her novel *Unmarriageable* is a parallel retelling of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1817) in current day Pakistan. Though the plot of Kamal's novel like *Pride and Prejudice* revolves around marriage yet it also offers a deeper insight into the patriarchal culture of Pakistani society which limits female roles and forces them for early marriages. In modern day Pakistani mothers gets frustrated, they start hurrying and gets very much worried to find suitable partners for their daughters and tie them in marriages, the moment they realize that their daughters have hit puberty, become adult and are valid enough to marry. Mrs. Binat like Mrs. Bennet is "obsessed with getting their daughters married off because that was what good mothers did" (Kamal, 2019, p. 299). Similarly, numerous amount of Pakistani mothers are insecure about the future of their daughters. Soniah Kamal holds a detailed comparison and takes the point further by highlighting that the situation in Pakistan unlike the regency period of England is much worse because school going girls are forced for early marriages. These marriages have devastating impacts on them because resultantly they are being deprived of their basic right that is of a proper education.

Unmarriageable tip to toe depicts the Pakistani society. The novel reflects two particular areas of Pakistan which is Lahore and Dilipabad. Alys Binat the protagonist of the novel lives resides with her family of 7 in Dilipabad, (a fictional small town in Pakistan). Alys is a strong-willed and independent woman who is strongly reckons the societal norms that dictate that women should be confined to only get married, bear children like a human production factory and stays in kitchen managing house holds and settle down. She challenges the traditional gender roles in Pakistani society. She also tries to dismantle the mindset that regards marriage as a sole aim of life for girls. Throughout the novel, Alys and her four sisters navigate the

complexities of life in Lahore, Pakistan, including the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. The sisters face societal scrutiny for their choices, but they persist in pursuing their passions and dreams. As we find in the clever *Unmarriageable* that the thought regarding young lady being pledged is very summed up. It says: "It is a reality generally recognized that a young lady can go from beggar to princess or princess to poor person in the only seconds it takes for her to acknowledge a proposition." (p. 3) This sentence was expressed by one of the understudies of the hero "Alysba Binat" when she requested that her understudies reproduce the initial sentence of the original *Pride and Bias* by Jane Austen. We can snag the general public in which the novel is set, disregarding the specific situation and depending on the language, through this sentence. The symbolism of the 'princess' is utilized here by the essayist to stress the significance which is given to the drew in ladies.

Early Marriages an Obstacles in the way of Education

Early marriage is depicted as a major obstacle for girls like Alys in the novel. It not only deprives them of the opportunity to pursue education and fulfill their potential, but also perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces societal norms that prioritize marriage over personal aspirations. 'It happened the past night! Complete amazement!' Tahira looked empowered and restless. 'Ammi came into my room and said, "Put away your homework, you're not kidding." Miss Alys, they are our family friends and own a material plant.' 'Well,' Alys said, 'without a doubt, congratulations,' and she rose to give her a hug, even as her heart sank. Young women from recognized middle age families like sixteen-year-old Tahira married early, started families right away, and had grandchildren of their own out of nowhere. It was a lucky uncommon kind of individuals who set off for college while the rest got hitched, for this was the Tao of obedient young women in Dilipabad; Alys dared to such a limit as to say the Tao of good young women in Pakistan.

The protagonist, Alys Binat, is a young woman living in Pakistan who dreams of pursuing

higher education and becoming a teacher. However, her dreams are threatened when her mother pressures her to consider marriage as her only option for a secure future.

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As Kamal writes in *Unmarriageable* it is the bitter truth of our existence as women in Pakistan. We were merely objects to secure the future of our families, and our education was only as important as our marriage ability" (p, 60).

The novel highlights the need to address the issue of early marriage and empower young women to pursue their dreams and achieve their full potential through education. The novel portrays how women who are married off at a young age are often treated as inferior and are not given the same opportunities and rights as men. Then children disrespect to their parents when parents violate rights. It is a reality generally recognized in this world and past that having a uninformed mother is more terrible than having no mother by any means. 'There,' Tahira said, cautiously cleaning chalk dust off her mind. 'Is that OK, miss?' Alys grinned. 'It's an assessment.' 'It's discourteous and insolent, Alys's sister, Jena, is married off to a man who abuses her and denies her the right to pursue her passion for music. Jena is forced to conform to her husband's wishes and abandon her dreams. Kamal writes, "Jena's world was small, bound by the walls of her husband's house, and the chords of her piano. Her dreams were like birds that had flown away, out of reach, leaving her with a hollow ache in her chest" (p. 169). The novel sheds light on how early marriage can deprive women of their basic human rights, including the right to education, freedom of expression, and the pursuit of their dreams. It emphasizes the need for society to recognize and respect women's rights and to work towards creating a world where women have the freedom and opportunity to fulfill their potential. The

novel highlights how societal norms and expectations often prioritize marriage over personal aspirations, particularly for women. AlysBinat, the protagonist of the novel, faces pressure from her mother and society to prioritize marriage over education and a career. Kamal writes, "A woman's ultimate goal was to be married, and all else was secondary. Even if one's family encouraged education, it was only so that one would make a better marriage prospect" (p. 37). *Unmarriageable* by Sonia Kamal addresses the problem of early marriages, particularly in the context of Pakistani society. The novel portrays how early marriage can be detrimental to the lives of young women and perpetuate gender inequality.

Economic Factors

Economic factors such as poverty and limited educational opportunities can also contribute to the perception that unmarried girls are unmarriageable. In some societies, girls who come from poor families or lack access to education may have limited options in terms of potential partners. This can create a sense of hopelessness and resignation, as girls may feel that they have little control over their own lives and destinies.

Furthermore, the expectation that girls will eventually get married can create a disincentive for families to invest in their daughters' education or career development. If girls are seen as ultimately destined for marriage and domestic responsibilities, then there may be little incentive to invest in their education or provide them with opportunities for professional development. This can limit girls' options and perpetuate the perception that they are unmarriageable.

In conclusion, the perception that unmarried girls are unmarriageable can be influenced by a range of cultural, social, and economic factors. These factors can create a sense of pressure, stigma, and hopelessness for girls who do not conform to societal expectations around marriage and gender roles. To address this issue, it is important to challenge traditional attitudes towards marriage and gender roles.

Oppression of Women

Sonia Kamal's *Unmarriageable* is an attempt to bring forth how the women are oppressed in Pakistani society. It sheds light on the problems of female gender and she traces similarities between modern day Pakistan and the 18th century England. Kamal illustrates that in 21st century they are still denied of their fundamental rights and treated merely as a commodity for marriage.

AlysBinat, the protagonist of the novel talking about the obsession of people with marriage in Pakistan says that "This is Pakistan. The home of the marriage industrial complex. Always a wedding taking place everywhere. Weddings are our nation bread and butter and foundation and flag" (p. 214). Marriage is an ever recurring phenomenon and a source of income for people in Pakistani society. Alys asked with a sigh "Did anyone talk about anything except marriage in this country?" (p. 43). She regrets the fascination of people for marriage in Pakistan.

She maintains that "marriage should be a part of life and not life" (p.16). Uniting in the bond of marriage should not be the sole aim of life for women. But Rose Nama, a student of Alys challenges this view as she gives a fitting reply to her teacher "marriage is a corner stone of our culture" (p. 17). She gives vent to traditional and orthodox viewpoint. Robert Louis Stevenson in his essay "*on Marriage*" says that Marriage is like a life in this –that it is a field of battle, and not a bad of roses."

AlysBimat is teacher by profession and she teaches the subject of English literature to the school girls. She knows that most of girls in her class would not complete their graduation due to the custom of early marriage. Their parents would push them for early marriages. Alys wants to dissuade her students from marriage as they need to focus on their education and career. When she comes to know that Tahira, one of her students is engaged recently she urges her to convince her parents and her fiancée to "allow you to finish secondary school" (p. 15). Tahira wears a gold ring that attracted all the girls in class and everyone earnestly desire to have that ring very soon on their hands. The entire "class

swarmed around Tahira, wishing out loud that they would be blessed with such a ring and began their real lives” (p. 14). The idea that real life begins after marriage is inculcated in young minds and Alys took it upon herself to change the perception of her students. Kamal thus highlights that how school going girls are being oppressed and deprived of education by driving them for early marriages.

Marriage is a way of Security

Marriage is a long lasting responsibility between two individuals who vow to remain with one another through various challenges. This responsibility ought to be founded on affection rather than security. In the novel, we see various thoughts connecting with marriage which lets us know that individuals get hitched for acquiring monetary security. An understudy while reproducing the initial sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* expressed: "It is a reality generally recognized that on the off chance that you are the girl of rich and liberal guardians, you have the privilege to not get hitched only for security." (p. 5) The structure and language of the sentence obviously let us know that it has been occurring that young ladies get hitched for monetary security. The essayist calls it a 'extravagance' to get hitched for adoration in any case we see that Sherry gets hitched to acquire monetary security and not love. We see that in the clever *Unmarriageable*, the hero Alys is compelled to wed Farhat Kaleen by her mom yet she will not wed only for his high monetary condition. She needs to get hitched as a result of affection. Alys won't think of her as monetary and social foundation prior to wedding anybody. She is of the view that one ought to wed exclusively on account of affection. We see that when Farhat Kaleen proposes to Sherry she acknowledges the proposition and chooses to wed him. She doesn't adore him still she concurs in light of the fact that this marriage could give her security. Alys and Jena, then again, decline reality generally recognized and weds Darsee and Blunders, separately, as a result of adoration.

Conclusion

Early and arranged marriages have been subjects of concern in various parts of the world,

including Pakistan. Numerous studies have highlighted the adverse effects of such marriages affecting the lives of young girls. It continues to evolve, addressing new challenges and pushing for greater gender equity and social change. of the study which takes account of the factors that affect women. The novel portrays the challenges faced by young women who aspire to achieve both personal and professional goals, while also navigating the societal pressures around marriage. Through the character of Alys Binat, and her student Tahira Kamal highlights the tension between education and marriage for girls in Pakistan. Through character Tahira writer expose the role of mother that how she stop Tahira education and compel her for education. Alys mother is also same psyche as Pakistani mothers .She also worried about daughters proposals but Alys itself a strong, independent woman who dreams of becoming a writer and pursuing her passion for literature. However, she also feels the pressure to conform to societal expectations around marriage and the role of women in society.

By promoting access to education for girls, and challenging traditional attitudes towards marriage and gender roles, we can create a world where every girl has the opportunity to thrive and achieve her dreams. Kamal's novel challenges the idea that marriage is the ultimate goal for women, and shows resistance towards stereotypical representation of marriage 'and highlights the importance of prioritizing education and personal growth. The novel portrays the transformative power of education in empowering women to challenge traditional gender roles and pursue their own goals and aspirations and deny marriage priority. By advocating for equal access to education for women, we can create a world where every woman has the opportunity to reach her full potential, regardless of societal expectations around marriage. Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* underscores the importance of education over marriage for women in Pakistan. *The* novel highlights the tension between traditional gender roles and the desire for personal and professional growth, and emphasizes the transformative power of

education in empowering women to challenge societal expectations and pursue their own aspirations. By prioritizing education and advocating for equal access to education for women, we can create a world where every woman has the opportunity to thrive and achieve her dreams.

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