



Unveiling Patriarchy: A Feminist Stylistic Analysis of Ismat Chughtai's "The Wedding Shroud" Through Sara Mill's Framework

Aziz Ullah Khan

Assistant Professor, Chairman, Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Science and Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

Muhammad Hassan Shah

MPhil in English, Lecturer, Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Science and Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

Ahmad Ali Khan

PhD linguistics scholar at kohat university of science and technology

Abstract

This study investigates the representation of gendered oppression and power structures in *The Wedding Shroud*, a short story originally written in Urdu by Ismat Chughtai and translated into English by Tahira Naqvi. Employing Sara Mills' feminist stylistic framework, the research analyzes how language, through word choices, sentence structures, and narrative positioning, constructs, reinforces, or resists patriarchal ideologies. The analysis draws on selected excerpts from the translated text, purposefully chosen for their relevance to feminist concerns such as female labor, silenced desire, social marginalization, and internalized patriarchy. By applying Mills' model across three levels such as lexical, syntactic, and reader-positioning, the study uncovers how seemingly ordinary language encodes deep social meanings. The findings reveal that the text not only reflects but critiques the oppressive structures surrounding women's lives. The study also acknowledges the role of translation in retaining or altering the feminist intent of the original. Ultimately, this research highlights the value of feminist stylistics as a critical tool for uncovering gendered ideologies in literary texts.

Keywords: Feminist Stylistics; Sara Mills; Ismat Chughtai; *The Wedding Shroud*; Gender and Language; Patriarchy; Feminist Literary Analysis; Urdu Literature in Translation; Narrative Voice; Lexical Choice; Reader Positioning; Women's Oppression; South Asian Feminism.



Background of the Study

Language is not neutral; it reflects the values, beliefs, and power structures of society. In most cultures, including South Asian ones, women have long been represented in literature through a patriarchal lens, often as passive, emotional, or dependent. Feminist literary studies aim to challenge these portrayals by analyzing how language shapes gender roles and how women are silenced or empowered through text (Lazar, 2005).

In this connection, Feminist stylistics, developed by Sara Mills (1995), is one such approach that examines how specific words, sentence structures, and narrative techniques reflect or resist patriarchal ideologies. It focuses on how women are positioned in a text and how readers are invited to respond to them.

Furthermore, Ismat Chughtai, a bold and progressive Urdu writer, is known for portraying women's inner lives, desires, and struggles in conservative societies. Her short story *The Wedding Shroud* (translated into English by Tahira Naqvi) gives a powerful glimpse into the social pressures faced by women, especially around marriage, labor, and sexuality. Through rich and symbolic language, the story subtly critiques the norms that oppress women.

Lastly, this study uses Sara Mills' feminist stylistic framework to examine how *The Wedding Shroud* represents gendered experiences through language. By analyzing selected lines from the story, this research uncovers how Chughtai challenges traditional gender roles using stylistic and narrative strategies. The study also considers how the English translation preserves or changes the feminist elements of the original Urdu text.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze how language reflects and challenges patriarchal norms in Ismat Chughtai's *The Wedding Shroud*, using Sara Mills' feminist stylistic framework. By examining selected excerpts from the translated text, the study aims to reveal how word choices, sentence structures, and narrative positioning portray female oppression and resistance.

Literature Review

Language plays a central role in shaping how gender roles are perceived and maintained in society. Feminist scholars argue that language is not neutral but reflects existing power structures, often marginalizing women's voices and experiences (Cameron, 1992). Feminist literary criticism emerged to challenge these representations and to analyze how language contributes to the construction of female identity, subordination, and resistance.

Additionally, Sara Mills (1995) introduced feminist stylistics as a method of analyzing texts by focusing on how linguistic choices reflect and reproduce patriarchal ideologies. Unlike traditional stylistics, which often focuses on aesthetics, feminist stylistics is more concerned with power, ideology, and gender. Mills' model examines texts on three levels: lexical choices, syntactic structures, and reader positioning. She argues that texts can both support and resist patriarchal norms depending on how language is used.

In this connection, Feminist stylistics allows for detailed analysis of how women are portrayed in literature, whether they are given agency, whether their voices are heard, and whether the text invites readers to challenge or accept gender norms.

Moreover, South Asian feminist writers like Ismat Chughtai have used fiction as a space to critique cultural norms and express the inner lives of women. Chughtai's stories often focus on women's sexuality, domestic labor, social constraints, and resistance. Scholars such as Kishwar Naheed (2000) and Rahman (2011) note that Urdu literature has long been shaped by patriarchal ideology, but writers like Chughtai have disrupted that tradition.

Besides, Chughtai's work is particularly significant because it blends realism with irony and symbolism, giving voice to silenced women without overt rebellion. Her stories, including *The Wedding Shroud*, address themes like forced marriage, sexual repression, and the burden of honor in a subtle but powerful way.

In addition, analyzing translated texts through a feminist stylistic lens requires sensitivity to the role of the translator. Venuti (2008) argues that translation is not a neutral act, it involves choices that may preserve or alter the ideological content of the original. Tahira Naqvi's translations of Chughtai's works are praised for maintaining much of the feminist tone and voice. However, linguistic nuances, especially in representing silence, irony, or subtext, may be shifted in translation.

Despite this, feminist stylistics remains a useful tool for analyzing translated texts, as it focuses on the linguistic surface of the available version, helping uncover ideological meanings even if some original texture is lost.

Lastly, while many studies have explored Ismat Chughtai's feminist themes and narrative strategies (e.g., Bano, 2003; Rahman, 2011), there is a noticeable gap in applying Sara Mills' feminist stylistics specifically to her short stories in translation. This study fills that gap by offering a stylistic analysis of *The Wedding Shroud* using Mills' framework, revealing how language itself becomes a tool of both oppression and resistance.

Methodology

Research Type

This study is qualitative in nature, employing textual analysis as its primary research method. Qualitative research is appropriate for studies that seek to explore and interpret meanings, language, and cultural practices, rather than quantify data (Creswell, 2014). Given that the aim of this research is to examine how patriarchal ideology is embedded in language, a qualitative approach allows for a deeper exploration of the nuances of stylistic and ideological features within the literary text.

The qualitative framework is particularly suitable because it emphasizes contextual understanding over generalization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This study analyzes how language, power, and gender ideologies interact in *The Wedding Shroud*, using Sara Mills' feminist

stylistic model, which itself calls for detailed, close readings of texts rather than statistical measurements.

Lastly, the rationale for using a qualitative textual analysis stems from the nature of the research questions. The study is concerned with how language in literature reflects and reproduces gendered power relations. As Sara Mills (1995) herself explains, feminist stylistics is grounded in analyzing linguistic choices across multiple levels, lexical, syntactic, and reader-positioning, to uncover how discourse supports or resists patriarchy. These kinds of questions require interpretative, discourse-sensitive analysis, not numerical data.

Data Collection Method

The primary data for this study consists of selected excerpts and lines from the English translation of Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short story *The Wedding Shroud*, translated by Tahira Naqvi. The researcher used purposive sampling to collect data, a method often used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this case, passages were chosen specifically for their relevance to feminist stylistic analysis, focusing on expressions of gendered oppression, female labor, silence, sexuality, social marginalization, and resistance.

Furthermore, only those lines were selected which contained lexical items, sentence structures, metaphors, and narrative strategies that aligned with Sara Mills' feminist stylistic framework. The goal was to ensure that each excerpt could be meaningfully analyzed through Mills' levels: lexical choice, syntactic structure, and reader positioning.

Data Analysis Method

The data was analyzed using the framework of feminist stylistics proposed by Sara Mills (1995). This method involves examining the text on three interconnected levels:

1. Lexical Level

Word choices and their connotations were analyzed to reveal gendered ideologies and binary power structures (e.g., "shrunk hands", "slaves", "buyer").

2. Syntactic or Sentence Level

Sentence structures were studied to observe the grammatical roles of male and female characters, use of active vs. passive constructions, and the representation of agency (e.g., "proposals... lost their way").

3. Reader Positioning Level

The analysis considered how readers are invited to interpret or judge events, characters, or power relations, including the use of irony, rhetorical questions, and emotional appeals.

Moreover, this method is interpretative, critical, and context-sensitive, making it appropriate for analyzing a translated literary text embedded with social and ideological meaning. By employing Sara Mills' model, the study remains grounded in a well-established feminist linguistic tradition, allowing for a systematic critique of gendered discourse (Mills, 1995).

Use of Translation in Data

Since *The Wedding Shroud* was originally written in Urdu and translated into English by Tahira Naqvi, the analysis is based on the translated version. While acknowledging that translation may affect tone or stylistic nuances (Venuti, 2008), the study assumes that the key ideological and linguistic elements, especially those relevant to gender, have been preserved sufficiently for a valid feminist stylistic analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Sara Mills' *Feminist Stylistics* (1995), a framework that examines how language constructs, maintains, or challenges gender ideologies. Unlike traditional stylistics, which focuses on aesthetic features, feminist stylistics emphasizes the ideological role of language, especially in representing women and gender relations.

Mills' model analyzes texts on three levels:

1. Lexical Level

It focuses on word choices that carry gendered or oppressive meanings (e.g., "slaves," "shrunk hands," "buyer").

2. Syntactic Level

It examines sentence structures such as passive voice, agent deletion, or modality, which can obscure agency or normalize female subjugation (e.g., "proposals lost their way").

3. Reader-Positioning Level

It explores how texts guide readers to sympathize with women, question patriarchy, or internalize bias through irony, rhetorical questions, and narrative tone.

This framework is well-suited for analyzing *The Wedding Shroud*, as it helps uncover how the text, even in translation by Tahira Naqvi, critiques patriarchal norms through subtle linguistic strategies.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the selected textual excerpts through the lens of Sara Mills' *Feminist Stylistics*. The focus is on how language constructs, maintains, and reflects gendered power relations within the narrative. By examining lexical choices, metaphors, passivization, and backgrounding, the analysis reveals how female characters are linguistically marginalized, their labor undervalued, and their desires suppressed. The selected lines demonstrate how seemingly neutral language embeds patriarchal ideology, subtly shaping readers' perceptions of women.

Kubra's mother held an exalted position as far as measuring and cutting concerned... no one really knew how many dowries had been adorned by her small, shrunken hands. (Chughtai, 2004)

This line shows how women's labor, especially domestic and invisible labor, is respected within the female community, but remains unrecognized publicly. Sara Mills argues that women are often backgrounded in language. Here, even though the mother is "exalted," the phrase "shrunken hands" shows physical toll and exhaustion, not empowerment. Her value lies in serving others, not herself, a linguistic reflection of gender roles.

The edges of the flowerets had faded... but there was no sign of Kubra's wedding procession yet. (Chughtai, 2004)

The fading flowers symbolize decay and delay. Language like this creates subtle pressure on women, especially regarding marriage. In patriarchal societies, aging without marriage is shameful, and the line reflects that indirectly. Mills would highlight how indirectness and symbolism here reflect internalized social pressure on women.

Her shrinking, timorous womanhood... left as furtively as it had come. The intoxicating drug first became salty, then bitter. (Chughtai, 2004)

This metaphor portrays female desire as something secretive, fleeting, and ultimately punished or painful. According to Mills, female sexuality is often silenced or stigmatized in patriarchal discourse. The phrase "furtively" implies shame, while "bitter" reflects the emotional consequences of unmet desires. The language shows how women's desires are delegitimized.

If a gusset was cut the wrong way... the groom's mother would demand solid gold bracelets. (Chughtai, 2004)

Here, sewing mistakes are linked with financial punishment. The line sarcastically shows how female efforts are judged by patriarchal standards. According to Mills, language like this reflects how power is exercised through everyday practices, even through simple acts like sewing or cooking. Women's work is never enough.

Abba was as slight as a pole... proposals intended for Kubra somehow lost their way. (Chughtai, 2004)

This ironic description suggests that the father is useless or invisible, yet Kubra bears the burden. The passive voice—"proposals... lost their way", hides male responsibility and blames fate or the woman. Mills would say this shows how language shifts blame subtly away from men and onto women.

The women from the neighbourhood sat silently, apprehensively, as if waiting for some major catastrophe to occur. (Chughtai, 2004)

This line indicates shared female anxiety, but also hints at a collective awareness. Their silence is not weakness, it is a muted protest, a common understanding of how women suffer under

patriarchy. Mills encourages us to look at how silences and hesitation in women's dialogue represent resistance or tension, not passivity.

Kubra sat in the mosquito-infested ante-chamber, far from all this hustle and bustle. (Chughtai, 2004)

The physical isolation of Kubra mirrors her social and emotional exclusion. The ante-chamber symbolizes a life stuck between public celebration and private suffering. According to Mills, this kind of setting is not neutral, it reflects the gendered experience of being pushed to the margins.

Eating humble fare themselves, the women cooked sumptuous parathas, fried meatballs and biriyani for Rahat... she fed the best cuts of meat to her son-in-law-to-be. (Chughtai, 2004)

The stark contrast between "humble fare" and "sumptuous" reflects the way women deny themselves to please men. Mills would focus on how lexical choices (like "sumptuous") elevate male needs and normalize female sacrifice. This is not just food, it is a pattern of systemic self-erasure.

Rahat took the glass of water from me and grabbed my wrist. My heart leapt into my mouth... I fled. (Chughtai, 2004)

The power imbalance is clear. The male is active ("grabbed"), the female passive and scared ("I fled"). Mills highlights how even body language and verbs in a sentence show who has control. The lack of female voice or protest reflects societal silencing of sexual violations.

These 'hands', which grind spices from morning to night... like slaves. When will their subservience end? (Chughtai, 2004)

This is a direct critique of how women's domestic roles are dehumanizing. Mills argues that such metaphors ("slaves") are crucial, language can reveal or reinforce oppression. This line uses metaphor as a tool of feminist resistance, questioning normalized suffering.

Will they ever find a buyer? Will no one ever kiss them lovingly, will they never be adorned with henna? (Chughtai, 2004)

Using market language like "buyer" shows how girls are seen not as people but as items for sale. Mills' feminist stylistics would call this out as a structural problem encoded in everyday language, how romance and marriage hide economic and social exploitation.

'Whose goat is this anyway, and who's giving it fodder?' (Chughtai, 2004)

This metaphor dehumanizes women, comparing them to livestock. It also shows women turning against each other, which is what Mills calls internalized patriarchy. When women adopt such language, it reveals how deeply social norms penetrate consciousness.

Tuberculosis... seized her with one pounce and she quietly deposited her weary existence into its lap. (Chughtai, 2004)

Language here romanticizes death as an escape from suffering. The gentle phrasing, “quietly deposited”, suggests resignation, not resistance. Mills would interpret this as a reflection of how women are taught to accept suffering and even see death as peace.

She smiled. It seemed that today, at last, she was convinced that her Kubra’s dress for chauthi was ready. (Chughtai, 2004)

This is bitter irony. The “wedding dress” turns out to be a funeral shroud. Mills highlights how such juxtapositions of ritual and reality expose the cruelty hidden beneath cultural practices, especially for women. The smile masks years of pain and unfulfilled dreams.

Findings

This study applied Sara Mills’ feminist stylistic framework to analyze selected excerpts from *The Wedding Shroud*. The analysis was conducted at three levels: lexical, syntactic, and reader-positioning. The key findings are as follows:

1. Lexical Level:

The story uses emotionally charged and ideologically loaded words (e.g., slaves, shrunken hands, buyer) to represent the emotional and physical suffering of women. Lexical choices portray women as laborers, caregivers, and commodities, reinforcing the idea that their value lies in service to others, particularly men. Words associated with shame, secrecy, and silence (e.g., furtively, timorous, bitter) reflect how female desire and identity are suppressed under patriarchal norms.

2. Syntactic (Sentence) Level:

The frequent use of passive voice and agent deletion (e.g., “proposals... lost their way”) removes male responsibility and shifts blame to fate or women. Sentence structures subtly marginalize female agency while giving active roles to male characters, reflecting gendered power imbalance.

3. Reader-Positioning Level:

The narrative positions the reader to sympathize with female characters and question traditional rituals and gender expectations. Irony, rhetorical questions, and vivid imagery guide the reader to view marriage, dowry, and female domestic labor as tools of systemic control rather than celebration. The transformation of the wedding dress into a shroud symbolically exposes the tragic outcomes of cultural and gendered expectations.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Ismat Chughtai’s *The Wedding Shroud* offers a powerful critique of patriarchal structures through subtle yet effective linguistic strategies. By applying Sara Mills’ feminist stylistic model, the analysis revealed that the text portrays women not only as victims of societal norms but also as silent witnesses and subtle resisters of those norms.

Through lexical choices, sentence structures, and narrative techniques, the story uncovers how ordinary language reflects and maintains gendered oppression. At the same time, it subtly resists these norms by exposing their emotional and social consequences.

This research shows that feminist stylistics is a valuable tool for analyzing gender in literature, particularly in translated South Asian texts. It also highlights the importance of linguistic analysis in understanding how literature can both reflect and challenge societal ideologies.

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