

Analysis of Sabyn Javeri's *The Adulteress* from a Marxist Feminist PerspectiveAbid Ali Khan¹, Dr. Aziz Ahmad^{*2}, Hina Iqbal³**Original Article**

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of Sabyn Javeri's short story The Adulteress from a Marxist feminist perspective. Javeri's Hijabistan (2019) is a collection of short stories that explores themes of gender, identity, and societal norms within a Pakistani-Muslim context. This analysis explores how the protagonist's experiences in the story reflect key concepts of Marxist feminism, focusing on the oppression faced by women within familial and economic structures. The story follows a woman's journey from a mundane domestic life to a realisation of her own potential and worth, echoing larger struggles for gender equality and empowerment. The article examines the portrayal of patriarchal structures, gender norms, and economic exploitation within the story. By employing Marxist feminist theory, the analysis highlights the protagonist's transformation as she gains economic stability and finds her voice through creative expression.

Keywords: Marxist feminism, Sabyn Javeri, Patriarchy, Gender, Adulteress

Introduction

Marxist feminism, a branch of feminist theory, posits that capitalism is the primary source of women's oppression. Drawing on the insights of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels from the 19th century, this perspective highlights Marx's analysis of capitalism's ability to thrive by exploiting labor. According to Marx and Engels (1848), social classes were conceptualized to elucidate the dynamics of control exerted by one class over another in the production of goods. The bourgeois, representing those with a higher economic standing, and the proletariat, denoting individuals of a lower economic status who labor for the bourgeois, exemplifies this distinction.

Marxist feminists claim that this unpaid labor is essential to capitalism, enabling men to focus on economic production while maintaining a stable workforce. Without women's unpaid labor, balancing work and home responsibilities would be challenging for workers. Thus, Marxist feminists highlight the exploitative nature of this unpaid labor and its integral role in sustaining the capitalist system (Armstrong, 2020)

In a capitalist society, women's primary role revolves around unpaid domestic labor, which often limits their opportunities for paid employment. This phenomenon was particularly evident during the World Wars when a significant number of men were deployed for military service. In the absence of men, many women were recruited to perform tasks that they would typically have been excluded from (Grayzel, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that women's wages were generally lower than those of men, and once the men returned from war, many women were compelled to resume their unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Additionally, women in a capitalist society are tasked with emotional labor such as maintaining the emotional stability of family members to enhance their work performance. Due to the exploitation experienced by their partners at the hands of the bourgeoisie, women are often expected to absorb their frustration. Unfortunately, this dynamic can lead to incidents of domestic violence (Abbasi, 2015).

Sabyn Javeri is an accomplished Pakistani author who has gained recognition for her contributions to contemporary Pakistani fiction. She is known for her thought-provoking novels and experimental short stories. One of her notable works is the novel *Nobody Killed Her* (2017), which delves into the dark subject matter and offers a contemporary perspective. Additionally, Javeri has authored *Hijabistan* (2019), a collection of experimental short stories showcasing Pakistani fiction's diversity.

Javeri's writing explores a wide range of themes, including gender, class, and the immigrant experience. Her insightful texts on creative writing have been widely published, further showcasing her expertise and passion for the craft. Currently, Javeri's research focuses on shedding light on forgotten literary heroes of the subcontinent and developing a discourse centered around cultural identity through creative writing. Her work contributes to the rich tapestry of Pakistani literature and offers unique perspectives on contemporary issues.

Hanif (2017), an opinion writer for The New York Times, in his article *Let's Talk About the Sex*, aptly captured the conservative attitude towards the topic of sex in Pakistan. He remarked that the word "sex" is treated as something taboo, as if merely uttering it carries the same weight as engaging in the act itself. Hanif goes on to highlight the irony of this cultural mindset in a country with a rapidly increasing population. The observation serves as a commentary on the reluctance to openly discuss and address issues related to sexuality and sexual health in Pakistani society. In societies with conservative values like Pakistan, any discussion regarding sex is considered a taboo subject. Within this context, acknowledging a woman's sexual desires is seen as a direct path to damnation. The concepts of modesty and shame revolve around women, with their adherence to wearing a hijab being the defining factor of modesty, while fidelity within the institution of marriage is another burden placed on them.

However, in her book *Hijabistan*, which is a collection of 16 short stories, Sabyn Javeri fearlessly delves into the intricate ways in which the hijab—a head covering worn by some Muslim women—symbolizes a woman's ideology and identity, whether it be liberal, conservative, or somewhere in between. By employing the hijab and the notion of modesty as central themes, Javeri explores a wide range of issues, such as marriage, sexuality, honor, and dignity, which shape a woman's identity within typical Pakistani-Muslim households.

The Adulteress is one of the short stories in *Hijabistan* where the protagonist of the story is a woman who finds herself lost in her thoughts and memories as she goes about her daily routine. She thinks of a man, possibly an affair, while folding clothes, walking to the kitchen, and chopping vegetables. The mention of an old film song triggers nostalgic memories and emotions within her. She reflects on her ordinary life, her role as a wife and mother, and the monotony she feels. Writing has become her escape, and she finds solace in the power of her words. The protagonist

recalls a moment of betrayal and passion with the other man, but questions whether it could be called infidelity. She struggles with guilt and confusion, but ultimately dismisses it as a fabrication, choosing to preserve it as fiction. As she continues her tasks in the kitchen, she contemplates the stories we tell ourselves and the hidden stories within us. The text ends with her realizing that her husband is a good man, and she redirects her focus and emotions toward him, returning to her routine.

This research work explores the elements of Marxist feminism in *The Adulteress* by focusing on how women are oppressed by family and forced to produce workforce. The protagonist's dissatisfaction with her mundane, traditional role as a housewife and her longing for escape. It critiques the patriarchal norms and expectations that confine women to domestic spheres and limit their personal and creative fulfillment. It also focuses on the exploitation and alienation of women by examining the protagonist's desires, both emotional and sexual, challenging societal expectations of women's sexual agency and the repression of female sexuality.

Research Objectives

- i. Investigate the portrayal of patriarchal structures and gender norms in the story
- ii. To evaluate social and domestic exploitative factors against women in the story under study

Research Questions

- i. How are patriarchal structures and gender norms depicted in the story, and what specific societal expectations and roles do they impose on the protagonist?
- ii. How does the story under study depict social and domestic exploitation factors against women?

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Marxist feminists analyze women's oppression through the lens of classism within a capitalist society. They emphasize the role of gender norms and the exploitation women face in this system. The traditional housewife's unpaid domestic labor is seen as supporting capitalism. Women experience dual oppression through both capitalism and the nuclear family (Tong, 2009).

In a capitalist society, women are expected to reproduce and socialize in the workforce. Their unpaid domestic labor contributes to the sustainability of capitalism. The division of labor assigns men to economic production and women to reproductive roles, reinforcing the capitalist system. Women's reproductive work is undervalued compared to men's production of material goods (Tong, 2009).

According to Tong (2009), the entrance of women into the workforce with productive roles did not result in them achieving parity with men, either in the workplace or within the domestic sphere. Certain Marxist and socialist feminists argue that women can develop a collective awareness of themselves as a working-class by advocating, for instance, for the recognition of household labour as legitimate and productive work.

By adhering to Marxist notions of social class and the consciousness associated with it, another idea frequently tangled with class and awareness is the concept of alienation. In accordance with Allen Wood's (2004, as cited by Tong, 2009) perspective, alienation refers to a state where individuals perceive their lives as devoid of meaning or their own worth as insignificant. This perception often necessitates reliance on illusions about oneself or one's circumstances to

maintain a sense of significance and self-esteem. Alienation, engendered by divisive class distinctions, results in the fragmentation of human existence and the loss of its inherent unity.

Furthermore, this estrangement extends to individuals' self-perception, as the experience of work as an arduous task to be accelerated erodes vitality. When the very potential source of 'humanization' causes 'dehumanization', individuals may encounter a profound psychological crisis, akin to hamsters on a treadmill – perpetually moving yet advancing nowhere (Tong, 2009, p.101). Foreman (as cited by Tong, 2009) asserted that this situation is even more adverse for women than for men. For women, the effects of alienation adopt a more oppressive form. Men seek solace from their alienation through their relationships with women; conversely, women find no relief. Intimate connections, which are essential structures of their oppression, exacerbate their predicament.

From Foreman's (1977) standpoint, women's alienation is exceptionally troubling because they often perceive themselves not as independent individuals, but as reflections of others. According to Foreman, a woman's self-concept is frequently entirely reliant on the recognition and affection shown by her family and friends. Positive expressions of emotion can elicit happiness, while even the absence of gratitude can lead to sadness. Thus, the objective of Marxist and socialist feminists is to shape a world wherein women can perceive themselves as complete beings – unified and whole – even in the absence of making those around them content.

This current research study is qualitative in nature and uses a sociological approach to analyze Sabyn Javeri's '*The Adulteress*'. Greenham's (2018, p.8) close reading technique is used to analyze the text which consists of six stages: semantic context, syntactic context, thematic context, iterative context, generic context and adversarial context. By incorporating these different stages of Greenham's close reading, the analysis delves deeply into various aspects of the text, offering a comprehensive understanding of "The Adulteress" from multiple angles. This approach enhances the richness of the interpretation and provides a nuanced analysis of the story's themes and significance. The study is sociological in nature and uses Tong's (2009) explanation of Marxist feminist theory.

Analysis and Discussion

Marxist feminism asserts that women are compelled to ensure their own survival as they bear the primary responsibility for their families and themselves. They grapple with challenges independently, relying on their inner strength. According to Tong's (2009) exposition of Marxist feminism, women are in a perpetual state of readiness, and their continuous engagement in familial and occupational roles leads them to develop a self-perception that would be different if they weren't socially and economically subordinate to men due to these roles. As a result, both Marxist and socialist feminists contend that analyzing the interconnections between women's work roles and their self-conception is crucial for comprehending the distinct nature of women's subjugation.

Based on the theory of Marxist feminism, the protagonist in "The Adulteress" represents Marxist feminism. There are some parts of the story that prove the reflection of Marxist feminism by her. As in a patriarchal society, she is expected to take care of her house, her kids, and her husband without being appreciated for it. Attaining an ideal home or even the love she has anticipated from her husband is beyond her reach. For a long time, she has acquired the understanding not to hold such expectations. Her existence is characterised by routine. She is an average housewife married to an ordinary man, living a life centered around managing, measuring, conserving, and

calculating "...she couldn't have, a perfect home, or even the love she expected from her husband ... long ago, she had learnt not to expect" (Javeri, 2019, p.51).

Engels (2004) asserts that the establishment of private property led to the empowerment of men in society, granting them authority and status, while women were rendered powerless due to their exclusion from income-generating activities and sources of production. As men assumed control over revenue-generating endeavors, women were confined to domestic responsibilities, with men withholding their surplus income. This gender-based exclusion initiated during the inception of civilization has persisted over time, perpetuating the marginalization of women. In "The Adulteress," the main character illustrates the repetitiveness of her daily life. She navigates her existence within a static routine, firmly rooted in her designated role. The reliance on her husband confines her, leaving her with little agency to make independent decisions for herself "Her daily routine, her children's demands, her husband's indifference ... Everything around her remained the same.... and headed back to her dark, airless kitchen. It was a space she knew well" (Javeri, 2019, p.49).

Marxist Feminism draws attention to the issue of uncompensated labor performed by women, coupled with their overwhelming workload (Abbasi, 2015). This perspective, advocating for women's rights, views their subjugation as a social construct and envisions the potential for their emancipation from the rigid dominance of patriarchy. The privileges enjoyed by men in society are largely attributed to their economic assets, and Marxist Feminism contends that women can break free from their hardships by gaining property ownership and control over revenue sources. As the protagonist feels that she matters and her words are as important as anyone else, "She realized then that it wasn't her husband she had been unfaithful to" (Javeri, 2019, p.55). The ultimate betrayal is toward her own identity. She recognized that she possessed a depth beyond the constraints of her domestic life. She knows her potential and her talents, which have been stifled by her circumstances. However, acknowledging this truth is a challenge. Whenever she attempts to label herself as a writer, she experiences a sense of fraud. Paradoxically, while fulfilling roles as a wife and mother, she also feels like she is merely playing a role "What then was her true self?" (Javeri, 2019, p.55).

Her source of joy arises solely from her written words, as she starts crafting stories featuring heroines mirroring her own identity. This is when she grasps the essence of genuine contentment. She doesn't rely on her husband for affirmation or actions that could bring her joy. Even the arrival of her three children fails to deliver the happiness she derives from receiving praise for her narratives. Her existence thrives independently, unburdened by economic reliance on male authority, and this autonomy garners admiration from others "And it was her words that had provided her an escape. Not just metaphorically but physically too (Javeri, 2019, p.51).

Another reflection of Marxist feminism by the protagonist is the way she made her decision by herself without others' influence. It is when she gets recognition for her stories and is invited to the opening ceremony for the launch of a women's magazine. As the journalist asks for her consent "... And then in a moment which surprised even her, she heard her voice say 'yes'" (Javeri, 2019, p.52). In an unexpected turn of events, she finds herself agreeing without a moment's hesitation—a decision that surprises even her. This moment stands as a revelation, marking the first time she has taken the initiative to make a choice solely for herself. Likewise, another incident serves as a testament to the transformative journey she has embarked upon that day. Following her attendance at the event when the journalist cum poet offers her to drop her home, he kisses her on the way back home. Initially, his kiss brushed against her lips with a gentleness, however, as

his ardor grew and encountered no resistance, it transformed into a ravenous, almost primal force. His urgency is so intense that she feels engulfed by his passion. Enveloped by his warmth, she is taken aback to realise that she does not experience any sense of suffocation. Instead, it is as if she has been drifting aimlessly until finally finding an anchor for her emotions “It was unlike any other feeling she had imagined” (Javeri, 2019, p.54). The admiration he expresses for her writing skill sends a tremor of delight through her. His words make her experience a genuine sense of value and significance. It is as if her purpose in life extends beyond the confines of a wife or mother. She realises that her life has a greater calling beyond serving others. She has been numb, distant, and devoid of feeling, much like the blank pages she would adorn with words later on.

However, a flash of light brings her back to her senses and she feels like being trespassed by the man. At that moment she realises that she is being exploited once more. He is simply orchestrating a scheme to consume her, treating her as if she is a banquet to be devoured. With this feeling, a surge of anger courses through her veins as she is not prepared for this. She refuses to be objectified. Amidst the fleeting brightness of the passing headlights, she felt diminished and undervalued. Suddenly she demands the man to cease his advances and it surprises her that he eventually stops “What took her by surprise was that he stopped. No one had ever really listened to what she wanted. Perhaps that was why she spoke through her characters” (Javeri, 2019, p.54). She considers everything that has occurred in her life and she knows that never has anyone listened to her. She is in shock making her realise that she is worth something more than a wife and a mother. The way that man reacts gives her the idea that her words have given her the worth she has always deserved and desired. It is the first time she has spoken for herself “Something inside her shifted. She had been heard” (Javeri, 2019, p.54). Due to this man, she understands that she has not betrayed her husband but herself throughout her life for not speaking and standing up for herself. She never had the courage to express openly what she felt before meeting this man and she is thankful to him for this, for this realisation, this change, and this courage to be herself again.

The Marxist Feminist perspective also highlights the significance of financial assets in the capitalist system. Individuals lacking access to opportunities for income and ownership are subjected to severe deprivation. This deprivation extends to women, who are intentionally denied access to sources of production and income generation. Financially stable men exploit the vulnerable situation of these women by offering monetary assistance, all while exploiting them physically for their own gratification. This exposes the exploitative nature of patriarchy, where men leverage their societal privilege to exploit women's bodies, providing financial support in exchange for survival (Engels, 2004). The protagonist has learnt to live her life without expecting anything from her husband long ago “She led a mundane life” (Javeri, 2019, p.51). She wishes to live the lifestyle that she portrays in her stories and she finds its solution in her words that provides her the escape. She starts writing stories, romantic stories. Once she receives a cheque for her writing, she starts feeling stronger. Even that modest income instilled within her a sense of empowerment greater than any she had previously experienced “Holding that little piece of paper in her hand gave her more joy than the birth of all three of her children” (Javeri, 2019, p.51). However, the reaction she receives from her husband is as ordinary as though she has presented him with a new recipe. Recalling how he had gently patted her head when she told him for the first time about her writings as if humoring her. The memory of that surge of indignation that had coursed through her entire being resurfaced. His response had been akin to the one he displayed when she shared a new recipe with him—his condescending demeanor, resembling the way he cautiously lifted a

spoonful of food to taste. Now, she contemplated whether this exasperation had played a role in driving her actions that led her to infidelity “she let down a closely guarded boundary” (Javeri, 2019, p.53).

"Individuals experience distress and dissatisfaction when their opportunities for earning and achieving independence are limited. Similarly, women who are dependent on men find themselves among the marginalized. Financially stable men exploit this situation by providing monetary assistance and, in return, subjecting these vulnerable women to physical abuse driven by their desires. Engels (2004) underscores the grim aspect of patriarchy, which manipulates women's bodies for its sinister objectives. Men leverage their societal privileges, utilizing women while offering partial financial backing to sustain their existence. Before the protagonist earns anything and has no recognition in society, she receives no praise for her household chores and responsibilities. She feels that no one listens to her as if her purpose is to serve her family only. However, when she is recognised for her work, she is known and given importance by her neighbors and even her husband “No one had ever

really listened to what she wanted” (Javeri, 2019, p. 54). Once she spoke for herself, at that particular instant, she gained a profound realisation that her life is under her control and her voice is a tool meant for her own use. Her financial stability gives her the strength that makes her feel that she can vocalize her thoughts, articulate her feelings, and pursue her genuine desires.

For women to attain their liberation, the key lies in recognizing and opposing patriarchy by asserting themselves. The dismantling of patriarchy necessitates strategic and thoughtful efforts. Within the framework of Marxist feminism, there's an emphasis on women engaging in endeavors that enhance their empowerment. Considering their unique situations and the resources at hand, women should evaluate how acquiring new skills can bolster their mental and financial well-being. Just as poverty led to women's unhappiness, achieving financial stability could pave the way for their prosperity. According to the perspective of Marxist Feminism, achieving economic stability brings about positive changes in the social and domestic spheres of women's lives (Abbasi, 2015). Additionally, women who are financially empowered tend to attract the admiration of their male counterparts. Elevated social status among women is met with respect within society. These lines from "The Adulteress" depict the protagonist's heightened status as she gains recognition as a writer.

And so, the opening night of the magazine became her opening night too, for she felt she was exploring a world of possibilities. Outside her home, she was not just a mother or a wife, but a writer. A person of her own (Javeri, 2019, p.53).

Her voice is acknowledged and valued by various individuals, including her neighbors, her husband, and a journalist who claims to admire her work. Upon agreeing to participate in an event, she experiences concerns about her children's well-being and anticipates her husband's reaction. Moreover, she contemplates the logistics of attending the event. To her surprise, everything falls into place that day. Her neighbors volunteer to look after her children and the journalist offers to arrange transportation for her. While her husband doesn't extend assistance, he relieves her by working late and not assigning her the task of cooking for him. She feels that change in herself “What took her by surprise was that he stopped. No one had ever really listened to what she wanted” (Javeri, 2019, p.54).

Marxist feminism underscores the necessity for women to ensure their own survival as they bear the primary responsibility for both their families and themselves. According to Tong (2009, p.102), the objectives of Marxist and socialist feminists converge in their aspiration to construct a world where women can perceive themselves as holistic individuals, characterized by unity rather than fragmentation. This vision entails women embracing their innate integrity, enabling them to find fulfillment even in circumstances where their ability to bring happiness to their families and peers might be restricted. The protagonist can be seen as a transformed individual who cares for herself, she realises “Her calling in life was not just to serve others. Or to be served” (Javeri, 2019, p. 54). This imperative drives her to navigate the challenges of life independently, drawing upon her intrinsic strength and resilience. Now “she had understood that her life was hers to live. Her voice was hers to use” (Javeri, 2019, p. 54).

It elucidates the significance of the protagonist cultivating a sense of self-assuredness and contentment in her individual identity. She is encouraged to revel in her complete being, finding fulfillment not solely through her role in family and society but by embracing her own intrinsic worth.

Based on the explanation above, we know that the protagonist in the story represents a description of Marxist feminism. It is proved by her struggle that she has begun from herself to escape her mundane life. She gains that consciousness when she becomes economically strong.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Adulteress* serves as a agonizing embodiment of the principles promoted by Marxist feminism, shedding light on the multifaceted struggles, triumphs, and potential for transformation that women face within a patriarchal society. The narrative intricately weaves together themes of recognition, economic empowerment, and self-realisation, all of which resonate deeply with the broader context of women's oppression and liberation.

The analysis discusses how the protagonist's daily routine and role as a wife and mother depict the patriarchal structures and gender norms within her society. It explores her sense of unfulfillment and the weight of societal expectations placed on her to conform to traditional gender roles. It also examines how her interactions with her husband and her feelings of being unheard reflect the imposition of specific societal expectations and roles on her. The protagonist's contemplation of her life's purpose within these roles highlights the impact of gender norms and societal expectations on her self-perception.

The analysis explores the protagonist's experiences, emphasising her daily tasks and responsibilities as undervalued domestic labor. It explores the protagonist's interactions with the male journalist, highlighting how women can be exploited in social contexts. The analysis examines the protagonist's evolving emotions during the encounter, showcasing the power dynamics that can contribute to exploitation. Besides that, it addresses the protagonist's realisation of the exploitation she has endured and her decision to assert her own desires and agency, indicating a shift away from being a passive subject of exploitation.

In both cases, the analysis provides textual evidence and interpretations that directly answer the research questions. It demonstrates how the story's narrative elements and character development serve as vehicles for depicting patriarchal structures, gender norms, and the exploitation of women in both social and domestic spheres.

Thus, *The Adulteress* not only offers a vivid exploration of a woman's personal struggle but also serves as a broader reflection of the collective struggle against gender-based oppression. The protagonist's journey encapsulates the core principles of Marxist feminism exposing the intricacies of women's exploitation, highlighting the potential for economic empowerment, and demonstrating the power of self-assertion. As her story unfolds, it reverberates with the echoes of countless women who have fought for agency, recognition, and liberation in a world shaped by patriarchal norms.

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