



RESEARCH PAPER

Feminine Stereotypes and Objectification in Punjabi Folklore: A Feminist Discourse Analysis of *Heer* and *Mirza Sahiban*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores feminine stereotypes and the objectification of women in two iconic Punjabi tragic love folk tales, *Heer* by Syed Waris Shah and *Mirza Sahiban* by Hafiz Barkhudar. Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this research investigates how these texts portray the roles of women within a patriarchal society. The study aims to explore the feminine stereotypes in the depiction of the protagonists, highlight the sexual objectification embedded in their physical descriptions, and examine the differences in their loyalties towards family and beloveds under the influence of Punjabi patriarchal culture. Through CDA, the research analyzes the ways in which these narratives depict women primarily through their physical beauty, submission, and obedience to male authority. The findings reveal that both *Heer* and *Mirza Sahiban* reinforce patriarchal ideals by presenting women as subordinate figures whose worth is often tied to their sexual allure and devotion to men. However, the contrasting loyalties of the protagonists—*Heer*'s unwavering dedication to Ranjha and *Sahiban*'s divided loyalties between her family and lover—highlight the complexities of female agency and resistance within these cultural constraints. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between gender, power, and representation in South Asian literature, offering critical insights into the lasting impact of gendered portrayals in folklore.

KEYWORDS Female Representation, Feminist Discourse Analysis, Gender Stereotypes, *Heer*, *Mirza Sahiban*, Patriarchy, Punjabi Literature, Sexual Objectification, South Asian Culture

Introduction

Punjabi culture is one of the richest in the world, with its literature capturing festivals, foods, clothing, music, and essential aspects of beliefs, customs, ideologies, stereotypes, and gender roles. This study explores Punjabi culture by examining the societal position of women within its patriarchal structure. The focus is on understanding the expectations placed on Punjabi women, their behaviors in relational roles with men, and the broader implications of these cultural expectations.

Syed Waris Shah, an eminent Punjabi Sufi poet, is renowned for his poem '*Heer*', which centers around the female protagonist, *Heer*. Through this narrative, the text offers insight into the feminine roles within Punjabi culture, often marked by secondary status in a patriarchal setting.

The history of humanity is characterized by recurrent injustices and encroachments by men against women, aimed explicitly at establishing absolute domination over them (Castle, 2007, p.95).

Punjabi literature is replete with numerous instances of the restricted role of women and their biased representation. *Mirza Sahiban*, written by Hafiz Barkhudar, is one of the greatest tragic love tales in Punjabi. In both texts, women are idealized primarily when they embody obedience, reverence for male authority, and self-sacrifice, which this study critically examines. Patriarchy idealizes women when they are submissive to men, show reverence for their decisions, and never oppose what men impose on them. Only those women are romanticized as ideal, who play the roles of an obedient daughter, a submissive wife, a supportive sister, and a self-sacrificing mother. They are respected for their willingness to subordination to men. Only the males i.e. fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons are given primary importance and reverence, and women are treated as "others" in a male-dominated society. The present research is a comparative analysis of the central female characters in these great poems, *Heer* and *Sahiban* from a feministic point of view.

This research explores the representation of feminine stereotypes and the objectification of female characters in two significant Punjabi works, *Heer* and *Mirza Sahiban* using feministic CDA. It examines how the protagonists, *Heer* and *Sahiban*, navigate their loyalties between family and beloveds under the constraints of a patriarchal society.

Literature Review

Feministic Perspective

Feminism emerged as a political movement aimed at addressing the marginalization and subordination of women in societies dominated by male authority. Feminists reject the idea that biological differences between the sexes determine roles and assert that social and cultural ideologies propagate sexual discrimination, positioning women as inferior and secondary in relation to men. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1993). According to Beauvoir, women are often treated as the "Other," defined in opposition to men, who are viewed as the subject, the essential figure, while women are relegated to the role of the inessential.

Beauvoir asserts that the female character is defined in relation to man, who is not defined in relation to her; she is incidental and inessential, while he is the Subject and the Absolute—she is the Other (Beauvoir, 1993, p.16). Feminist critics view literature as reflecting the power dynamics of patriarchal societies, where male authors typically portray women as passive beings whose only goal is to seek male approval or affection (Freidan, 2001). The feminist lens interrogates how these portrayals contribute to maintaining unequal power structures and reinforces the need for equal rights and empowerment of women in all domains of society.

Description of Women in Literature

Historically, women in literature have often been depicted through stereotypical images that emphasize physical beauty and domestic roles. Tanner (1986) affirms that "the images or stereotype has some truth—as stereotypes often do" (Tanner, 1986, p.1). These stereotypes about women seem true. Women's roles are considered as related to household alone while men have multi-dimensional representations. Olsen (1999) asserted that men's job was to sustain the entire family by earning money whereas women remained at home to deal with household and nurturing babies. Women are commonly blamed for their foolishness and wordiness in conversation. It is rarely

recognised that, in addition to their inherent characteristics, women are also influenced by their surroundings. According to Mary Austell (2002), people tend to ignore women's innate traits and the reality that they are just as capable of doing the best things as males.

In literature too, women have almost always been described in terms of their physical beauty. Men-written literature highlights a woman's beauty and the charm of her body parts like eyes, lips, breasts, waist, thighs, neck, smile, and much more. On the other hand, she is regarded as having no intellectual capacity. She is portrayed as a mere embodiment of desire and sensuality. The accentuated portrayal of her body parts by the male authors illustrates their sexual intents and objectification of the female body. Fredrickson and Roberts, in their Objectification theory (1997), suggest that numerous women are sexually objectified and represented as objects for the pleasure and use of others. It becomes evident when "a woman's body or body parts are isolated and treated separately from her identity, leading to her being perceived mainly as a physical object of male sexual attraction" (Bartky, 1990). Man-written literature does not present her as capable of rational thinking. It is full of women characters that are completely subordinate to the desires and domination of men. Male authors depict women as representations of sexuality and desire. Men view women as objects that they can shape in any form they desire. Punjabi literature is no exception where the socially constructed stereotypes about women are almost always derogatory for women.

Socio-Cultural Constraints for Women

Family customs, cultural norms, and religious structures confine women to roles of obedience, loyalty, and subordination to male authority. Beauvoir states that marriage is the fate that society has conventionally presented to women (Beauvoir, 1993, p.447). In the context of feudal patriarchy, marriage is a union of two families rather than two individuals. By forming alliances with other powerful classes, it is regarded as a way to increase the current power. Daughters are viewed not as distinct individuals but merely as tools in men's pursuit of greater power. They are regarded as the finest presents for exchange. Flax observes: "... the core of kinship involves the distribution of women between men...the exchange strengthens ties among groups and grants men authority" (Flax, 1990, p.144).

Social Expectations of Patriarchy from Women

"Patriarchy is perceived as centered around males and dominated by them, structured and operated to place women in a subordinate position to men across all cultural areas: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic" (Abrams, 2007, p.89). The patriarchal ideology influences the works that have historically been considered great literature, predominantly authored by men. Feminist critics examined these texts to reveal how male authors and poets employ various tactics to maintain their dominance over women. They depicted women as solely emotional individuals who lack the capacity for logical reasoning.

A home is seen as the sole sanctuary for virtuous women. Priority is afforded to the woman who remains at home: "*andar baithi lakh di, bahar gayi kakh di*" (the one at home is valued at a lakh, while the one who goes out is valued at a straw). Another saying "*tain kam kharab; mard nu chakki, sandhe nu gah, ran nu rah*" (three things are undesirable: grinding for a man, threshing for a buffalo, and traveling for a woman) further illustrates the importance of the four walls of the house for a woman (Chhabra, 1962; Singh, 1981).

In patriarchal societies, men have often shifted blame onto women, highlighting their perceived flaws instead of addressing their own. Simone de Beauvoir aptly observes, "A man is justified in being a man; it is the woman who is at fault" (Beauvoir, 1993, p. XIII). Similarly, within Punjabi male-dominated culture, women are frequently reduced to objects of desire, valued primarily for fulfilling men's sexual and emotional needs. Women, in turn, are conditioned to view men as their ultimate authority, their "lords of life," as Beauvoir further notes that for men she serves as entertainment, a delight, a companion, a dispensable gift, he is for her the essence, the meaning and the rationale of her being (Beauvoir, 1993, p. XIV).

Feminine Stereotypes

A stereotype is described as "a commonly accepted yet rigid and simplified perception or concept of a specific kind of person or object" (Oxford Dictionary). Kunda (1999) posits stereotypes as "cognitive images of social groups" (p.315). Baker and Ellece (2011) opine that "Stereotypes simplify an individual or group to a limited set of striking, easily understood characteristics, which are often overstated, typically unfavorable, and help reinforce distinctions between in-groups and out-groups". Gender stereotypes dictate how men and women should act in specific manners. A strong stereotype against women is prevalent in Punjabi culture and globally, suggesting that women cannot be trusted. A research on the position of women in Punjab's society states: "In theory, women are recognized as a fundamental unit of society." However, there exists another depiction of women; "they were perceived as capricious, delicate, alluring, seductive, prone to deceit, foolishness, and considered the source of all misfortunes" (Kaur, 2000).

In Punjabi literature, there are a lot of examples of stereotypical descriptions of women, their restricted roles in society, male-assumed infidelity of women, and set expectations from females in society. This study probes down deep into the comparative analysis of how the central women figures in two famous Punjabi love tales have been depicted physically along with their restricted roles and stereotypical familial, social, and cultural expectations from these women.

Material and Methods

Theoretical Framework

This research employs the theoretical framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze the portrayal of Heer and Sahiban in Punjabi literature. Feminist CDA focuses on how power and gender intersect in discourse, aiming to expose inequalities and challenge the patriarchal norms embedded in texts (Lazar, 2005).

Feministic Critical Discourse Analysis

Feminist CDA examines how gender roles are constructed and maintained through language and cultural representations. It critiques the hierarchical relationship between men and women and the socio-linguistic strategies perpetuating male dominance (Lazar, 2005). By applying this approach to *Heer* and *Mirza Sahiban*, this study reveals how patriarchal ideologies shape the depiction of women in Punjabi folklore. Butler (1993) emphasizes that gender is not a natural category but a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations. In applying feminist CDA to *Heer* and *Mirza Sahiban*, this study critically examines how patriarchal ideologies are embedded in the texts, particularly in the portrayal of women as subordinate to male authority and as subjects of male desire.

In the Punjabi patriarchal social order, men and men-made ideologies exercise control over women and they become their prey unknowing this as a form of oppression in a male-dominant society. Feminist discourse analysts highlight these injustices based on sex and gender for the cause of getting women empowered equally as men do. The main concern of feminist critical discourse analysts is to critically analyzing discourses that uphold a patriarchal order of society – power relations that systematically benefit men as a social group, and harm, reject, and disempower women as a social group (Lazar, 2007). To successfully unfold the underlying feminine stereotypes, sexual objectification of women while describing them, and biases in presenting the partial and grey picture of women in Punjabi folklores, the present research uses this feministic framework of critical discourse analysis.

Results and Discussion

The present research takes into account two of the most well-known tragic love stories in the genre of Punjabi folklore. The brief summaries of the two stories have been given below:

“Heer” was written by *Syed Waris Shah* and is one of the most eminent texts of Punjabi literature. *“Heer Waris Shah”* relates the journey of a Punjabi man and a woman who fall in love and unfolds how society and their families treat them. Thematic and stylistic aspects of Syed Waris Shah’s *Heer* make the story rich in socio-cultural context. Disregarding human dignity, values, and rights, particularly towards women is quite evident in the lore. Heer, a beautiful, strong-willed, and loyal woman and Ranjha, a handsome, goodhearted yet weak man are the main protagonists of the story. It is told in the story how different events unfold and how men as the heads of the family make major decisions about women’s lives, how human rights are violated, and how protecting honour is valued greater than even human lives in Punjabi society.

The other story taken for analysis is *“Mirza Sahiban”*, written by *Hafiz Barkhurdar*. In this Punjabi poetry, the poet tells about a man Mirza, and a woman Sahiban who fall in love with each other in the same Punjabi culture as Heer’s. But the way events unfold for them is quite different, yet it leads to the same tragic ending, as in Heer. Hafiz Barkhurdar’s story reveals different stereotypical social and cultural practices in male-dominated Punjabi society. In the story of Mirza Sahiban, Mirza and Sahiban are cousins, not by blood. Mirza’s mother and Sahiban’s father were ‘milk siblings’. They get together to study in childhood. As they became adolescents, Mirza started getting attracted to Sahiban due to her unmatched beauty. And Sahiban grew to love Mirza due to his chivalry and charm. But none was in the favour of this romance. People opposed it on different moral and cultural grounds and thus they were separated and killed in the end when they tried to elope.

The current research aims at the description and depiction of two central female characters of Punjabi folklores. It focuses on the feminine stereotypes embedded in the depiction of Heer and Sahiban’s characters, the sexual objectification used in the description of their physical beauty and the differences of their loyalties towards their beloveds in Punjabi patriarchal society.

Description of Heer’s Beauty

Heer is described as the most beautiful, tall, and strong woman in Syed Waris Sha’s poem. The lines that the poet uses to describe the beauty of Heer are stated below:

*"Ki Heer di karay tareef sha'ir mathay chamakda husan mehtaab da ji,
Khooni choondiaan raat jivain chandvalaysurkh rang jivain rang shahaab da ji,
Nain nargisi mirg mamolraydey gallan tehkiaan phul gulaab da ji,
Bhava anvang kamaan Lahore dissan koi husann a ant hisaab da ji."*

Translation:

(What could the poet say in the praise of Heer. Her forehead is as if there was a moon shining on her face. Her hair is as dark as night. Her complexion is as the colour of Shahaab- a famous star. Her eyes resemble the Nargis flower and are very sharp shaped as the eyes of a deer and are very shiny. Her cheeks seem to be the petals of a Rose. Her eyebrows are arched like a shooting bow. Her beauty is limitless.)

Waris Shah used a lot of metaphors to describe her face, eyes, forehead, and hair and painted a matchless and fantastic picture of Heer through his artistic pen. The significant point here is that this picture shows that Heer's beauty is "flawless".

Description of Sahiban's Beauty

In Hafiz Barkhurdar's "Mirza Sahiban", Sahiban's beauty was described to be matchless and unique. A few lines from the poet's description of Sahiban's beauty are stated below;

*"Dhi Kheva di Sahiban jistey hooraan kundh kad'dan,
Tey pariyaan parbat sat nay jutti da vaikh husan,
Sahiban da qad saro kalkoon jhjivain dohbay vah pon,
Laban se jam sharab da pi aashiq mast thon,
Sahiban dey khooni nain pakhavlay bazaar vang takkan,
Oh paaran val val dilaan nu bakin rat peevan;" (Stanza: 12)*

Translation:

*Sahiban, the daughter of Kheva, whose beauty makes the houris unveil,
Fairies leave their mountain abodes on catching a glimpse of hers,
Her body resembles that of a demoiselle standing amidst two rivulets,
Her lips intoxicate the lovers like chalices of wine,
Sahiban's gaze matches that of a hawk eager for a prey,
Like a night's darkness, her eyes penetrate deep into the onlookers' hearts. (Stanza: 12)*

The descriptions of both the female characters show many similarities. The similarities are not only in the household and societal conditions and the reciprocal involvement in the love affair of both women but also in the physical descriptions of their beauty.

Feminine Stereotypes in the Depiction of Heer and Sahiban's Characters

Just like an ideal Punjabi woman, both Heer and Sahiba are described as *Alhar Mutyaars* (young maidens). Those descriptions reveal many **stereotypes** regarding the feminine beauty of a Punjabi woman. The stereotype of a Punjabi woman is that she must be tall, with wide shoulders, with beautiful deer-shaped eyes. She must have long and dark hair, a wide forehead and redness in her cheeks, and lush pink lips- *hoonth yakooti* [Ruby coloured lips], as Waris Shah describes. Both these women, Heer and Sahiban, are described to be utterly beautiful and it is due to their physical beauty that Ranjha and Mirza fall for them.

Another feminine stereotype is that the beloved of a male is always a highly young, untouched maiden of matchless beauty. Ranjha chose the most beautiful of the women of Siyaals to have a love affair and make love with. The same is the case with Mirza who loved Sahiban for her physical beauty and bewitching attraction. He could not resist the physical changes of puberty appearing in her adolescent body. Ranjha and Mirza's love for Heer and Sahiban respectively is merely for their rich physical charms and not for their personal or individual attributes.

Sexual Objectification in the Description of Female Characters

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) posits that women are frequently depicted solely as sexual objects to satisfy the lust and sexual urges of men. Punjabi literature is abundant with portrayals of female characters whose bodies have been sexually objectified. In "*Heer Waris Shah*", each time Ranjha speaks of Heer, he focuses on her physical form. His demeanor reveals that he does not regard Heer as a person; instead, he views her as an object meant to fulfill and satisfy his sexual desires. Heer is depicted from head to toe during her initial appearance in the narrative. It implies that her value is connected to her physique. Waris Shah paints her grand beauty similar to an artist. He begins to speak of her jewels, features, forehead, and hair, subsequently highlighting her body parts to commend her beauty. He compares her body parts to various objects such as an apple, a mountain, and silk fabric. He depicts those body parts as though they have their own distinct identity.

Her vivid red lips gleam like rubies, akin to pearls.

Her breasts, crafted from marble, are solid and resilient,

Yet the feel is as gentle as butter.

The top of the crests are like euphoric waves,

However, it seems as if two pillars of silk;

Have been placed on her chest. (Stanza. 57)

It seems as a justification of the physical objectification of Heer that the male poet has presented Heer as arrogant because of her beauty as if her awareness of her bodily charms is an open invitation for men to leer at her and to think her as a sexual object.

Another instance of sexual objectification of the female characters in "*Heer Waris Shah*" is the description of the beautiful young virgins shown dancing to please the lustful and sexually thirsty gaze of Ranjha at Rangpur.

"They were dancing like drunken fatuous,

And pushing hips of each other,

In the meantime, they smack their breasts with one another." (Stanza. 324)

The body parts of these virgins have been singled out for the amusement and gratification of men-folk on the basis of sexism.

Heer and Sahiban's Loyalties towards their Beloveds

Another stereotype associated with Punjabi women is that they are and ought to be focused on their families. She needs to remain faithful to her husband. Heer possesses unwavering loyalty and total devotion to her beloved Ranjha, despite his frequent doubts regarding her faithfulness. She repeatedly states that her whole being belongs to him and asserts that as long as blood flows in her veins, she will remain his slave. He could do anything with her, including selling her in the market. Without him, her existence feels "pointless and transitory" (Hills & Hills, 1968, p.19).

Waris Shah opines that the true grace of a woman lies in her modesty and obedience. Such women are portrayed as consistently compliant and yielding. They are restricted to only domestic affairs and their first and foremost duty is to serve their family and husbands:

The charm of a house comes from a woman.

In these lovely houses, faithful and dutiful wives reside.

A few of these thrive joyfully with their partners in all circumstances.

However, some invest hours and hours embellishing themselves.

Waris Shah, the true beauty of these women lies in their shyness and submission.

These are the women who are constantly obedient and submissive. (Stanza. 482)

One of the biggest differences between the characters of Sahiban and Heer is their affiliation and affection toward their families. Heer was an only child and everyone expected her to be loyal to her family under any circumstances. She was supposed to obey her father's and her uncle's commands all the time, but she didn't. She tried to pave her own way and make her own decisions and tried to do whatever made her happy. This character of Heer breaks the stereotypes of the women of Punjabi culture. She got married against her will but still didn't forget Ranjha. They eloped after her marriage and were killed by her family.

Sahiban, on the contrary, was family-oriented. She had brothers and was attached to her father. She did love Mirza but her character shows the other side of a Punjabi woman, which is that she would never try to hurt her family, and her affections are divided between her romantic lover and her family. This is evident because when Mirza and Sahiban elope and Mirza sleeps to get some rest under the shade of a tree, she hangs his quiver away from his reach and breaks his arrows into two. Mirza was known to be an excellent marksman and archer throughout the area and she knew that if her brothers were to catch them, Mirza would kill them all with his bow and arrows. She couldn't see

her brothers hurt or slain. But her brothers killed them as soon as they caught the sight of them and Mirza was betrayed, by his lover. These were the last words of Mirza;

"Bura kito yee Sahiban, mera Turkish tangiya jand!"

Sahiban, you committed a dreadful act by removing my quiver!

Both women differ in their loyalties towards society and their beloveds. Heer completely subdued to Ranjha whereas Sahiba's loyalties were divided between her lover Mirza and her brothers. It is due to the characters' actions that Heer is always named before Ranjha whereas Sahiban is named after Mirza because she let her lover down and got him killed. Hence the loyal and deceiving pictures of Punjabi women in patriarchal society have been shown in this comparative analysis.

- Punjabi literature reflects entrenched feminine stereotypes, portraying women as emotional, submissive, and primarily valued for their physical beauty.
- Both Heer and Sahiban are depicted through sexually objectified descriptions, with their body parts singled out and idealized.
- While Heer represents loyalty to her beloved above all else, Sahiban demonstrates a divided loyalty that underscores her attachment to her family.

Conclusion

The works of Syed Waris Shah and Hafiz Barkhudar constitute a literature that suggests the conventional thinking patterns of males of society who almost always tend to treat women as inferior. Punjabi women are tied with familial and societal traditions just as Heer and Sahiban. Women like Sahiban have miserably divided loyalties towards their family and their lovers. Though Punjabi women are supposed to be submissive to their men in each phase of their lives, courageous and decisive women like Heer pave their path according to their inner wishes, breaking the stereotype of a Punjabi submissive woman. As far as men in patriarchal society are concerned, they consider women as merely sexual objects to gratify the males sexually whenever they desire them, and consider women as evil after their sexual fit is over. Hence, it gives the impression as if it is very hard for men to acknowledge women as thinking beings who are aware of their rights and making decisions for themselves.

Recommendations

In the light of this research, the following recommendations may be suggested:

- Other genres of Punjabi literature can be critiqued from a feministic point of view.
- Gender representation of both males and females in these texts can also be analyzed.
- Similar research may be done on the literature of other regional languages of Pakistan.

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