



## Sexual and Self-Objectification: A Feminist Analysis of Selected Pakistani Short Stories in English



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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the problems of sexual and self-objectification in selected short stories of Pakistani female writers writing in English. The study focuses on Talat Abbasi's *Simple Questions*, Bina Shah's *The Wedding of Sundari*, Shaila Abdullah's *Moment of Reckoning*, Qaisara Shahraz's *A Pair of Jeans*, Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah's *The Bull and the She-Devil*. The study uses the theoretical framework of Fredrickson and Roberts' sexual objectification. Sexual and self-objectification is very significant and a different issue faced by the women in the patriarchal society. This study argues that women are not only sexually abused in society and treated like useless objects, but also they internalize this attitude of society and behave as the patriarchal society expects from them. This behaviour of women helps the patriarchal society to further marginalize and victimize them.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Pakistani Literature, Patriarchy, Self-Objectification, Sexual-Objectification

### Introduction

Feminism is a movement that speaks about the social, political, economic and personal equality of both sexes. The critics have presented feminism by specifically focusing on the rights of women. Feminism awakens the consciousness of women for equal treatment in society. Feminism speaks that the biased treatment of both genders creates a rift in society. In Pakistan, many feminist writers write for the rights of women and about the treatment of women as slaves, subjugated, inferior and snubbed beings (Ahmed, 2017). In certain regions of Pakistan, women are destined to be the victims of violence and torture from a very early age. Pakistani Feminist fiction writers point out the ways in which women are presented as stereotyped and marginalized, ironically sometimes by the authors who claim to be challenging a culture of oppression (Ahmed, 2013). The present study points out the causes of objectification and oppression on women through short stories to interpret why they face gender inequality and discrimination for being the mothers of a female child, for their dressing style and are victimized in the name of *karokari*. The study attempts to analyze five selected Pakistani English

short stories by using the theoretical assumptions of sexual and self-objectification propounded by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). This study is qualitative and employs the method of textual analysis for interpretation of the selected short stories.

### Literature Review

Since independence in 1947, the question of women's place in society emerged in Pakistani fiction in English. It has been repeatedly discussed in the writings of Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri and Zulfikar Ghose. Pakistani fiction writers portray patriarchal suppression, but at the same time, female protagonists question the nature of patriarchal customs, traditions and women's sexual objectification around them (Ahmad, 2017). Collection of short stories by Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah *The Young Wife and Other Stories* (1958) depicts women's condition under patriarchal control in the form of sexual and self-objectification. In contrast, Talat Abbasi, in her short stories *Bitter Gourd and other stories* published in 2001, portray mostly

working-class women. Her women question patriarchal control and try to break the chains of slavery in unique ways. The confrontation that is not present in the works of Zaib-un-Nissa is visible in Talat Abbasi's writings, and women seem to be active rebels in her writings (Ahmad, 2017).

Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah has been given the name of the pioneer of Pakistani English short story writers. Her matchless collection of short stories *The Young Wife and Other Stories* published in 1958 got the honor of being the first collection of any Pakistani English short story writer. The women in the fiction of Zaib-un-Nissa are poor. The same trends are visible even after the gap of almost 50 years as the later writers portray the struggle and the courage of the young, poor women to survive in modern Pakistan and are ready to face the bitterness but couldn't cope with it (Kirmani, 2000). Talat Abbasi's collection of short stories *Bitter Gourd and other stories* published in 2001 represent characters of working-class women who question not only societal rules, their place in the family and in the society but also break patriarchal oppression in their own ways. Feminine consciousness has been an emerging theme in English Pakistani fiction and is evident not only in the writings of female writers but in the novels of Mohammed Hanif and Mohsin Hamid as well. Qaisra Shahraz, a Pakistani-British novelist, short story writer scriptwriter and educationist, has written three novels, *The Holy Women*, *Typhoon* and *Revolt*, published in 2001, 2003 and 2013, respectively. Her novels mainly deal with Muslim women and explore the challenges and problems they face. *A Pair of Jeans and Other Stories* (2013) is her great literary piece which focuses on the issues of identity crisis faced by Pakistani young women living in Britain. It also highlights the problems of young working ladies who can't differentiate between their traditional and Western norms and values. Shaila Abdullah and Bina Shah are the young Pakistani novelist and short story writers who also depict and shape the typical identity of Pakistani women in their own style. Previous researches relevant to the present study have mainly focused on psychoanalytical, feminist and postcolonial perspectives, and furthermore, a few studies have been conducted by using either feminist stylistics or corpus stylistics perspectives. Ahmad (2017) has carried out the postcolonial analysis of the story *The Bull and the She Devil*, and Hassan (2018) conducted stylistic analysis, and Maher (2003) conducted

psychoanalysis of the same story. The present study attempts to analyze five selected Pakistani English short stories by using the theoretical assumptions of sexual and self-objectification propounded by [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#). The study attempts to find the answers to the following research questions:

- How do women face sexual objectification as presented in selected Pakistani English Short Stories?
- How do female characters objectify themselves in these selected short stories?

### Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes the text by applying the feminist perspective of sexual objectification, given by Barbara Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997). Objectification theory is a frame of thoughtful know-how of women in cultures that objectify them sexually. Frederickson and Roberts (1997) highlight women's experiences and present the conclusion of the objectified behavior with them. This theory states that because of sexual objectification, women start objectifying themselves according to the views of others. Women begin to think that their bodies are objects separated from their selves. This internalization has been phrased as self-objectification. Sexual objectification is the act of treating a person exclusively as an object of sexual desire. Objectification broadly means treating a person as a commodity or an object without regard to his/her personality or dignity. Frederickson and Roberts (1997) present the effects of this objectification on women. According to them, women start thinking themselves as objects as described by society. They mold themselves according to the views of the people about their sexuality. Women begin to think that their bodies are objects and they have no individuality, and this typical mentality is called self-objectification. This theory not only highlights the existence of the sexual objectification of women in society but also shows its expansion in the culture of a certain society.

Objectification theory by [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#) is an expansion in the rapid change of feminist psychology aiming at understanding the results of living in a society that sexually objectifies women. Society considers women a tool or an object to be treated according to the whims of the patriarchs. They are presented in the media, in posters and in the

family as beautiful bodies by men. In the culture of such a society, the description of women's body parts by men is legal. They have been harassed and raped in such societies (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Sexual objectification explains that directly or indirectly, women face mental health issues because they start internalizing that they are sexual objects, and this is the self-objectification if women start thinking themselves according to the views of others. [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#) declare that self-objectification occurs in a woman when with the passage of time, she starts adopting the views of others as their lifestyle (Quoted in [Ullah, 2014](#)). As a result, women start evaluating themselves on the basis of their appearance that is self-objectification.

### Textual Analysis

In the first selected story, *The Bull and the She-Devil*, the woman protagonist is a victim of sexual objectification at the hands of her husband and society. He uses her just as a body. He treats her as her slave. In return, she becomes the victim of self-objectification and thinks that she deserves to be treated like this. "Softness and roundness of her slender form, the fairness of her complexion" ([Hamidullah, 1971, p. 42](#)) indicate that women have been considered only as sexual objects because of their femininity, shape of body and color. The man treats his wife as she is a sexual object, and the purpose of this object is to satiate his sexual lust, and she considers herself an object in return because of the self-objectification process. "To him, she was those first few weeks a body. "A body and nothing more. A body, beautiful and soft" ([Hamidullah, 1971, p. 43](#)) is the evidence enough that women of rural Punjab are just considered as an object of beauty for men's sexual pleasures. The emphasis on the word *body* indicates that his woman is not a human being but just a toy or body to play with. The rural Punjabi men, as depicted in the story, treat their wives just objects, especially the newly married men, for whom women are just new objects to satisfy their sexual desires.

Her husband continues to treat her as a commodity, but she remains silent because society has structured the mind of a woman to bow before her husband. The sexual desire of man so overpowers him that "He had suddenly become aware of another hunger within him, a hunger that he had never known before" ([Hamidullah, 1971, p. 45](#)). He thinks that woman's body is a source of satisfying his unending sexual appetite. Another hunger indicates that besides

the hunger of stomach, men only want to fulfil their sexual hunger from their women treating them as just an object. The use of words by the writer, for example 'body', 'softness', 'beauty', 'hunger', 'desire' and 'wanting' all indicate that the rural Punjabi men just know to work hard in their fields and their fatigued bodies want sexual catharsis from their women after such a hard job. The soft bodies of women allure them for yet another sexual bite. She never says no to him even after she gets hurt by him because she has undergone the process of complete self-objectification. Men don't bother to consider them as their soul mates or life partners or their spouse but as just objects. From them, they just demand whatever they want as they work hard in their fields to make them fertile, and in the same manner, they treat their women as lands to spend time with them and want fruits of their wombs. The writer of the short story exposes the typical mentality of rural Punjabi men who treat their wives as sexual objects.

The second story, *Wedding of Sundari*, is another example of a society where women have been considered as sexual objects. Their fate is in the hands of people who treat them as puppets. The text of the short story shows that the patriarchal dominance of society is behind the objectification of women. The question, "Are you sure? Do you know much about the family?" Sebhagi asked. Mohammed Karim snorted. They're family. What more do we need to know?" ([Shah, 2007, p. 82](#)). These lines expose the pitiable condition of women in the society of Pakistan, especially in rural Sindh, where they have no right even to choose the person with whom they want to marry. Their fate is usually decided by their parents, and this is enough for them that there is a family in which they are going to marry, and there is no concept of choice on the part of the girl to choose her life partner, and even the mothers cannot choose a life partner for their daughters. This type of treatment shows that women have been considered as objects with no rights in society. They cannot express their opinion about their marriage. It is the patriarch of the family who decides about their future life partner, about the age at which they should marry. They are given neither the education nor the awareness nor the information about their choice of their future life partner.

Women have to produce children and especially the male child is believed to be the symbol of honour for the in-laws and only in that case, both families may

be happy and satisfied. The woman has to secure her chastity throughout her life; otherwise, any minor mistake may lead her to be sentenced to death by the local community as they are objects and are treated as commodities, not human beings. "It was better for a girl to have her fate decided early" (Shah, 2007, p. 84) highlights the dilemma of the typical culture of Sindh where it is a tradition of arranging marriages of girls at an early age, the age when they are hardly able enough to identify their gender. It is a matter of dishonor for the parents if their girls are not getting married at an early age. They are not properly educated or trained for some sort of work. They are advised to do the domestic chores and to obey the commands of their husbands and in-laws. The girls start believing the concept of early marriage, and they are ultimately got married "as soon as they reached adolescence" (Shah, 2007, p. 84). They cannot look after their female child for more than twelve to fourteen years and they just arrange a marriage for them so that their owner may be secured and at in-laws, they are just considered sexual objects. This type of attitude shows the pitiable condition of women who are just considered sexual objects in society, and they snub their personal likes and dislikes for the sake of society and its patriarchal norms. What is more pathetic is that women willingly accept this status of being objects due to the continuous brainwashing by society and family. The women know: "That's not the only thing that's going to hurt tonight" (Shah, 2007, p. 86), but they are helpless creatures. They accept their lot and start considering themselves as objects that are made for men's pleasure. This is sexual objectification when women just consider that they should wear gay clothes at marriage night to please their men, and after that, they should have to produce especially the male child for them. In this way, women cover the journey from sexual objectification to self-objectification.

The third story is *A Pair of Jeans*, where a girl has been judged on the basis of her dressing style as she isn't a human being. Even her own family and in-laws condemn her as she is really an object. The story starts with "She herself had fallen in love with Miriam at first sight" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 7) when Miriam's future mother-in-law expresses her feelings of being mesmerized by the beauty of Miriam, which shows that not her son but she herself is in love with Miriam's beauty as she thinks that she is a Pakistani Muslim girl living in the West but follow the tradition of the East. She loves her for wearing traditional clothes and

following the traditions of the East. It seems that she is a beautiful object and is willing to be adorned as being a non-living object. This is the dilemma of today's society in which the in-laws of girls are so demanding that parents are afraid to have a daughter and decide her marriage because they have to present their daughter in front of those unknown people who are going to judge their daughter whether she is able to be someone's daughter in law on the basis of her dressing and behavior. As a result, women are considered guilty of not being perfect according to this wishful thinking on the part of society.

Society passes its value judgment by looking at the appearance of the girl as we visit the market and buy the articles (objects) by looking at their appearance, so there is not much difference between a girl and an object. That is why "Miriam sat up, noticing that they were ill at ease" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 4) when the mother of Miriam and Miriam herself feel uncomfortable about the dressing and feel ashamed of as well. They start feeling that Miriam's future in-laws are not talking to her with direct eyes. There is unusual behaviour and tone in their expressions, and without deciding the date of marriage, they leave their place. It seems as if they don't want to proceed further. This is something internalized by the girls that are why Miriam is uneasy when she feels "This was so unlike their usual behavior" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 4). Society has made up women's minds that women themselves should feel ashamed of their bold behavior and dressing. The mother of the girl and girl herself feels uncomfortable and feel ashamed about the dressing and behavior. The women become stereotypical objects and they want to act as "She wanted to quickly rush inside her home and peel them (her jeans) off" (Shahraz, 2013, p. 1). Sexual-objectification means to objectify women on the basis of the body for the specific type of traits of behavior. The same is the case with Miriam when she starts objectifying herself just like the other women whom society objectifies. She herself starts thinking that she should not have to wear such type of dressing that all day long she keeps on pulling her shirt down.

She isn't feeling relaxed with a naked inch of the belly or with tight fitted jeans, although she felt uncomfortable even with her friends. On returning home she feels uncomfortable in front of her future in-laws and feels ashamed. She quickly wants to change the dress as soon as it is possible. And a person starts objectifying oneself according to the comments or

description of the persons who are objectifying them. The person starts to live, dress and move as “It was amazing how she was able to move around the room at ease, in her *shalwar kameez* suit” (Shahraz, 2013, p.7). Miriam molds herself according to the thinking of the society and feels comfortable in her baggy Pakistani Eastern clothes like *shalwar kameez*, and she becomes a model of self-objectification.

The fourth story, *Simple Questions*, is also replete with the sexually objectified treatment of women who should be the perfect machines of housekeeping. She thinks about giving birth to a son as “Such a restless one this was, even in the stomach; I was sure it was a boy” (Abbasi, 2001, p.115) to strengthen the concept that only sons can share the burden of the family and they're the savior of the family and are the pillars to hold the whole structure of the family, and on the other hand, daughters are a burden on a family as the parents have to arrange dowry for them and they have to suffer throughout their life because of the in-laws of their daughters. The woman protagonist of the family suffers for not having a son and thinks that only having a son is the source of happiness for their family, and all their problems may be vanished soon because the son is supposed to support his father in earnings to share the burden of the family.

Here is the description of sexual and self-objectification when society objectifies women as an object for the service of man, and they should have to produce only a male baby. In this story, the local female doctor suggests the woman to try one more time to have a son despite the fact that she is too weak to give birth to another child. In Pakistani society, especially in villages, this type of objectification is found usually when women start objectifying themselves as a male-producing machine. Her role as a caring wife does not come to an end as “I don't tell him, I let him go off to work” (Abbasi, 2001, p.115). She takes care of her husband, even not taking enough food for herself so that her husband might eat enough to do more hard work. No doubt the man is a good husband and helpful, but with a sad expression, he says to her that it is the will of God that they are having daughters like they are waiting in line. When a woman has daughters and not a son the society blames the woman for not having a male baby, and the woman starts objectifying herself and blaming herself for not having a son as this is her mistake.

“Yes, massage her forehead and crack her knuckles like she's some Begum Sahib, Rani,

Maharani! Cackles the old woman” (Abbasi, 2001, p.116). The mother in law humiliates her daughter in law by using taunting words like a *princess, queen, rani, maharani, begam sahib*, when she feels tired and have a head massage from her elder daughter Halima, and she used to threaten her to go to the lady doctor and tell her to tie her up so that she would not be able to give birth to another child being so weak. As she has four daughters and three children died before birth because of her bodily weakness, and two of the three were male babies, and the screaming, cutting and bleeding during the childbirth of all children made her so weak. The family couldn't afford to pay for the childbirth as the woman is just like a machine to produce children. This is the demand of her in-laws and society to produce male babies, and she is also ready to fulfill the demands due to the sexual and self-objectification process.

The fifth story, *Moment of Reckoning*, describes the same objectified panorama that sucks the life of a newly-married girl. Shiwali has been treated as a sexual object by her in-laws, husband and even by her parents as “She was not an orderly person by birth her marriage had molded her into one” (Abdullah, 2005, p.44). The girl who was lazy and immature at her parents' house turns into a mature and obedient girl just like a puppet to follow the tradition of Pakistani society. She thinks that the humiliation of her act before her marriage will follow her throughout her life, and that's why she wants an escape from that decision of her marriage. She wants an escape from that depression by being silent all the time and keeping her busy with the household work. Her life changes as she “[w]aken her from her slumber when the rest of the house had not even stirred” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 44). The story describes the character of the protagonist Shiwali who is normal at her parents' place suddenly becomes an obedient woman at her in-laws because of her marriage and the changing environment. She becomes a silent, obedient girl who keeps herself busy in the daily works of the house without speaking much, and that is a strange thing for her in-laws. But her in-laws do not take much notice as it is not unusual as one day a woman has to follow the tradition of silence for her existence at her in-law's place. But if the girl is keeping herself busy from the very start of her marriage, then she must be a trained girl by her parents to be silent, obedient and submissive to her in-laws. Her marriage has molded her or transformed her into a mature lady as she is not



a real human being. She is an object, and the object can be molded or transformed into any shape according to the wishes of the society.

The girls after their marriage act as, “They walked like they were in some kind of trance, puppets caught in a show” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 45). Though they were puppets in the cage whose strings are in the hands of the in-laws and they have accepted the role of the puppet and the tradition of silence willingly by keeping themselves silent and busy in chores as they have gone through the process of complete self-objectification and they should have to follow the dictates of her parents that were given at the time of marriage and this self-objectification is because of the society that is actually objectifying them through their wishful thinking. “Cleanliness ritual would envelop her like a mania in the early hours of the lazy morning” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 44) indicate that the girl who remains sleepy and lazy at her parents' place is now active at her in-laws' place and she gets up earlier to start the daily domestic chores of the house when rest of the house members enjoy the deep slumber. Even the remaining ladies of the house are not so conscious to get up early in the morning but Shiwali has adopted this habit just because she thinks that this is the duty of an object to serve her in-laws. As women have been considered sexual objects whose work is just to marry a man and to serve him and his family and Shiwali is performing this duty perfectly and she believes this seriously that it is her ultimate end to do this at time with silence.

Shiwali has “... suppressed the restless beast in her heart by busying herself in the mundane tasks of her life that required her attention but instead received her devotion” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 44). There is some sort of pain in her silence; there are some unexpressed emotions that are evident on her face. She wants to speak, she wants to scream but she is forced to be silent at her in-law's place and she is the perfect expression of self-objectification. Shiwali wants to keep herself busy as she wants to forget that she has been married without her consent and she has sacrificed herself at the altar of her parents' wish. Shiwali doesn't want to give some time to make herself happy as somewhere in her mind, she has accepted the status of self-objectification. Besides, she is trying to keep herself peaceful by “Delved into this one habit in life where she had supreme control, where she was the queen and all the lifeless objects in the house her attendants, bowing and bending at her pleasure” (Abdullah, 2005,

p.44). No one cares for her emotions as “Everyone in the house sang her praises, but no one really understood her. Why wouldn't a girl of twenty-one have any interests? It was baffling to them” (Abdullah, 2005, p. 45). Everyone praises Shiwali but no one bothers to know the real cause of the silence of Shiwali as they have made up their minds that she might be a silent girl, an obedient girl who used to be silent at her parents' place. There is another aspect of self-objectification as society takes such women for granted, and there is a perception that these women are like this, right from the start.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that Shirin in *The Bull and the She-Devil* has been objectified by her husband as she is the property of her husband and only he is her master and she should have to obey him. He treats her as if she were not a real human being; rather she is just an object to be played with. Sundri in *The Wedding of Sundri* has been presented as a helpless object about which others decide what type of circumstances she should have to live in. She has not been treated as a human being, but just a sexual object about whom her parents decide to get her married at an early age and the women of the area accused her as a shameless girl, and the people of the village decide to kill her without confirmation of rumors about her. Miriam In *A Pair of Jeans* has been objectified due to her dressing style that no one likes to make a girl their daughter in law if she used to wear western dresses like a pair of jeans. In *Simple Questions* by Talat Abbasi, the woman has been objectified by society as a tool to produce male children so to be the caretaker of the family in the future and the female should have to sacrifice her whole life in the service of man and in a struggle of having a male child to get prestige in society. Shiwali in *The Moment of Reckoning*, has been objectified by her parents as they fix her marriage because they think that she has brought shame upon them just for meeting her fiancé without their permission before her marriage. She has been considered as a puppet after her marriage that just works in the house and remains silent all the time. Her in-laws praise her for being so obedient but no one feels her inner pains.

In sum, all five stories reveal that women are sexually objectified in one way or the other. Marriage and certain traditions act like institutions to subjugate women through the process of objectification. The patriarchal society misuses its power, and women

become the objects for sex, child-producing machines in such a society. The women act like objects for the satisfaction of men, and they get secondary and inferior status in the society with all the powers vested with the men. The power of decision making in the family lies with the men as women are not consulted

in these matters. Adding insult to injury, women internalize this secondary status and start behaving as the patriarchal society expects and demands from them. This adds more power and control to the male dominance for further exploitation and subjugation of women.

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