



An Analytical Study of Women Objectification in *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*

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Abstract

The objectification of women is a communal problem in every developed and underdeveloped society of the world. Women make a major population of the world, and serve the society in multidimensional modes, but still they are considered feeble to men. The subject of women objectification has remained focus of various researchers globally. This research focused three short stories drawn from “*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*” of Daniyal Mueenuddin to bring forward disparities and inequalities prevailing in patriarchal society of Pakistan. Additionally, it investigated the impact of these inequalities and injustices on downtrodden women of Pakistan. The objectification of women is such a discrimination that women are subjected to undergo in a patriarchal social set up. This study analyzes the objectification of women through the lenses of female characters selected from three short stories. This study uses theoretical frameworks of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton’s to draw outcomes for this study. Study findings exhibit that female characters undergo objectification and are treated as things by male in a male dominated strata of Pakistan.

Keywords: Women objectification, gender, patriarchy, oppression, feminism

1. Introduction

Daniyal Mueenuddin is a Pakistani-American writer. His book, ‘*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*’ received a prize in 2009. For his best writings, he has been honored with many awards. ‘*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*’ is a short story, comprising eight interconnected stories. The writer in these short stories, has presented complexities of a feudal culture and stratified Pakistani society, where some groups due to high status and affluent positions enjoy all privileges and luxuries of life and exploit the working class, especially women. These stories also shed light on the plight of women of lower social strata who become the victim of double oppression; firstly, as female, secondly being poor. The writer observed the prevalent social realities of a patriarchal Pakistani society very vividly and penned them down explicitly. The



anthology of these stories provide ample examples of women subjugation, subservience, and objectification. In certain instances, women seem to be reduced to the status of an object. The fall of women to the status of an object gives authority to influential men to exercise their power and authority on women. Hence, the lack of choices reduces women to mere objects in a patriarchal world, overly dominated by men. This research involves three short stories namely, 'Saleema', 'Provide, Provide', and 'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders', to explore the women objectification.

1.1. Study Objectives

The objectives of this research are as:

- To investigate the subtle means of objectification of women
- To explore all the implicit and explicit ways through which women are marginalized by men in a patriarchal society.

2. Literature Review

This section focuses on critical viewpoints of various feminists on the objectification of women. Many feminists consider objectification of women as an aftermath of oppression that had been happening to women over the centuries. "This links the idea of oppression with that of objectification: when women are treated as tools, they are treated as things, items lacking in agency" (Langton, 2004, p.285). "Sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p.174). Women have been objectified and treated as an object in male dominated society for the last many decades. The concept of objectification has been discussed and debated by various feminist writers over the years. Dworkin, Mackinnon, Kant, Nussbaum, and Langton are prominent writers among them. They consider women objectification as dehumanization and degradation of women. "From a feminist perspective, the prevailing conception of gender is understood as an ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination" (Lazar, 2005, p.7). Hence, women are subjected to suppression through varied ways and means.

Portrayal of female characters in literature is significantly shaped by gender inequality and injustice. "In the portrayal of society, the representation of women emerges as the most significant aspect for the writers of English fiction as part of feminism" (Ahmed, 2009, p. 90). "Indeed, conflicts over gender and class weave together the entirety of human history" (Mojab,



2015). “Socialism and feminism are two greatest movements today. The one aims to eradicate poverty, and the other to destroy servitude among women. Both are world movements. No matter, how backward the nation can be, you will find a revolutionist there preaching that poverty is unnecessary, and that a great organization is working to destroy private capital and to build a co-operative commonwealth. Furthermore, throughout western civilization, and even in the heart of the orient, you also find the woman revolutionist telling her enslaved sisters of the effort among women to attain their freedom, to gain the right to live, not according to men, but according to their own, conception of happiness and right” (Ovington, 1914, p.143).

“History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy’s earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus, concretely established as the Other” (de Beauvoir, 2010, p.193). “Women as a class are those individuals who are viewed and treated as objects for the satisfaction of men’s desire. In short, women are the sexually objectified, men the objectifiers” (Haslanger, 2012, p.38). “Central to the establishment of social roles for both women and men is the commodification of women, who were the property of men until quite late in human history. Daughters could fetch a bride-price, or be sold as slaves. Later, with the emergence of class systems, lower-class women were often sexually exploited by upper-class men, and if the upper-class men were at the same time white colonial masters, a race dimension appears on top of the gender and class issue” (Majstorović & Lassen, 2011, p.2). “Not only female colonized bodies were the object of observation and control, but also working-class women’s bodies were the target of middle-class and state regulation in Victorian times” (Romero Ruiz, 2012, p.7). “Dehumanization is real. It happens in real life; it happens to stigmatized people. It has happened to us, to women. We say that women are objectified” (Dworkin, 1993). “Being a woman is similar to being a man’s property; a property that he can give to whom he wishes to” (Bari, 2014, p.11). “Feminist thought, moreover, has typically represented men’s sexual objectification of women as not a trivial but a central problem in women’s lives, and the opposition to it as at the very heart of feminist politics” (Nussbaum, 1995, p.250). “Taking the body as an object has always been a double-edged sword for feminists, for women have traditionally been defined as the body. Over the mind/body opposition that informs our thinking has been superimposed the male/female dichotomy, so that mind is associated with male and body with female” (Romero Ruiz, 2012, p.11).



“To objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties” (Calogero, 2012, p. 574). “Objectification occurs when a human being, through social means, is made less than human, turned into a thing or commodity, bought and sold” (Dworkin, 2000, p. 30-31). “Sexual objectification has a crucial relationship to male supremacy. Sexual objectification is not rooted in the natural order of things either; rather, sexual objectification is a habit that develops, because it has an important function in creating, maintaining, and expressing male supremacy” (Stoltenberg, 1989, p. 41). “To be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to sexually used....and then using you that way” (Mackinnon, 1989, p. 327). “Sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman’s body, body parts, or sexual function are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Bartky, 1990, p. 35). The objectification theory proposed by Roberts and Fredrickson (1997) highlights the social and psychological impact of sexual objectification in a woman’s life.

According to this theory, women of color encounter double objectification, because, they are not only sexually objectified, but racially as well. Due to sexual objectification, women also undergo self-objectification and start evaluating themselves according to the observer’s eye and the society’s beauty standards. However, the aim of the objectification theory by Roberts and Fredrickson is only limited to the psychological sufferings that a woman may face in a culture where her body is evaluated and objectified. “This phallogocentric system of thought creates a social structure in which men, positioned at the center as subjects, possess power whereas; women are not only deprived of agency but are marginalized as mere objects in social, political, economic and religious discourses” (Salam, 2011, p. 17). “While men were remembered for their bravery and war achievements, it was the women who were immortalized for their beauty, for their control over others through the objectification of their bodies such” (Balraj, 2015, p. 70). “Ah, but the mystery of man is of the mind...whereas that of the woman is of the body” (Atwood, 1976, p. 166).

“In the book *In Other Rooms Other Wonders* all the characters in Pakistani society work for their economic prosperity and stability” (Waheed, 2017, p. 289). “The women in these stories often use sex to prey on the men, and they do so with abandon at best and rage at worst- in this patriarchal, hierarchical society, it is their sharpest weapon” (Sofer, 2009). “It won’t be



wrong to say that Mueenuddin succeeds in recreating a world where threads of longing, loss and unfettered love are intertwined with those of corruption, hunger for power and pursuit of economic happiness surpassing moral sensibility of every kind” (Shah, 2018). Here, most important is the author’s exploration of what happens to women in the Pakistani society. If they are born into privileged class (as Harouni’s daughters are) they become suppressors of the first order. And if they are born poor, they have but one asset-their body and the chance to offer it-and it must be used wisely” (Nisar, p. 3).

3. Data Collection

The data for this study comes from a short story collection, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin. We selected three short stories from the anthology. The female protagonists of the three chosen short stories were analyzed, with special focus as portrayed in the stories.

4. Theoretical Framework

This research is purely qualitative in nature based upon the objectification framework advocated by Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton. The short stories taken from Daniyal Mueenuddin’s book ‘*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*’ have been analyzed from the frame of reference of objectification.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Martha Nussbaum, an eminent philosopher and a feminist proposed a framework to describe the concept of objectification. “I suggest that in all cases of objectification what is at issue is a question of treating one thing as another: One is treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 256-257). She posits the following seven features of treating a person as a thing:

1. Instrumentality
2. Denial of autonomy
3. Inertness
4. Fungibility
5. Violability



6. Ownership
7. Subjectivity

Rae Langton further expanded the framework of objectification given by Nussbaum adding three more features in her framework. “I take this to be a particularly helpful proposal about what ‘object’ amounts to, in the notion of ‘treating as an object’, and this is, in my view, at least half the story. The other half, as we shall see, rests not on what an ‘object’ is, but on what ‘treating as’, amounts to” (Langton, 2009, p. 226).

Langton puts forward the following three features of objectification:

8. Reduction to body
9. Reduction to appearance
10. Silencing

5.1 Objectification of Women in the Short Stories

The female protagonists of the short stories selected for the present study undergo an objectification by male characters. These stories revolve around the lives of three female characters, Saleema, Zainab, and Husna and their struggle to make themselves identified and acknowledged by male characters.

5.1.1 *Saleema*

In this short story, the character of ‘Saleema’ represents the gendered disparities and she has been presented as a play object or a sex toy for the male characters. “Her father became a heroin addict, and died of it, her mother slept around for money and favors, and she herself at fourteen became the plaything of a small landowner’s son.” (Mueenduddin, 2009, p.17). Saleema opened her eyes in an impoverished family. She had been seeing the criminal and corrupt activities of her parents since her childhood. While opening up her past and background before Rafik, she said “What shall I say? I was brought up with slaps and harsh words we had nothing, we were poor” (Mueenduddin, 2009, p.35). Hence, her exposure to dark realities and dark experiences since her childhood made her sensual (left her with no other option but to tread the promiscuous life path inadvertently). “These experiences had not cracked her hard skin, but made her sensual, unscrupulous-and romantic” (Mueenduddin, 2009, p.17). Being a daughter and a wife of a poor man, she had always been yearning for the riches and valuables of life. She wanted to jump the ladder of the social class. She extended the illegitimate relationships with Hassan and Rafik for economic security, but all in vain since she could not



lead a life of a virtuous woman and neither Hassan nor Rafik loved her with purity, rather they fulfilled their physical desires from her and left her alone.

5.1.2 “Provide, Provide”

‘Provide, Provide’ unveils the issues of gender, power, politics and feudal culture of Pakistan. The character of Chaudhry Nabi Baksh Jaglani is the embodiment of corruption and exploitation. Unfortunately, the feudal try to become the lord of the laborer by taking everything in his hand. The same happens in the story “Provide, Provide”. Chaudhry Nabi Baksh Jaglani tries to become the lord of the people of Duniyapur, a small town of South Punjab. He not only mints the money by deceiving his master, Mr. K. K. Harouni, but also gratifies his physical needs by extending an illegal relationship with a poor maid, Zainab.

5.2 “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders”

It is a story of a girl named Husna, who is in search of a job. For this purpose, she meets the retired civil servant and landlord, Mr. K. K. Harouni with the reference of his estranged wife. K. K. Harouni first accepts her as a secretary, and then as his mistress. The two of them gets involved into a passionate relationship-relationship through which K. K. fulfills his sensual desires and Husna fulfills her economic, social, and emotional needs. This short story unveils the plight of a woman in a patriarchal society. We see that male masters are exploiting the female characters in this short story. The voice of the fair sex seems to be controlled and suppressed by male counterparts.

6. Nussbaum and Langton Framework of Objectification

6.1. Instrumentality

The idea of instrumentality presumes that “The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes” (Nussbam, 1995, p.57).

And I’m lonely, Sarwat. You’re in Karachi, Kamila is in New York, and Rehana has barely spoken to me in ten years. My friends are dying off or don’t go out anymore. She keeps me company. She’s no genius, if you like, but she can play cards and so on. (Mueenuddin, 2009, p.119)

The above excerpt has been taken from the short story ‘In Other Rooms, Other Wonders’. The text reveals that it contains the concept of instrumentality-one of the features of objectification. K. K. Harrouni being an elite and a powerful man uses Husna for his



emotional and physical desires. Here, the character of K. K. Harrouni objectifies Husna and reduces her to the status of an object.

6. 2. Denial of Autonomy

The concept of denial of autonomy assumes that “The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self- determination” (Nussbam, 1995, p.57).

Female protagonist has been subjected to the denial of autonomy. The below excerpt is from the short story “Saleema”. Saleema is a story of a girl who becomes a plaything of a suitor who takes her to Lahore in a service to the Landlord-K. K. Harrouni. In this short story, the character of Saleema is a play object or sex toy for the male characters.

“Then a suitor appeared, strutting the village on leave from his job in the city, and plucked her off to Lahore” (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 17).

The text reveals that Saleema has been reduced to the status of an object. The objectifier, the suitor exercises his position of strength and male power treats her like an object that lacks an independence and liberty.

6. 3. Inertness

The next element, inertness, which according to Nussbaum means “The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity. (Nussbam, 1995, p.57). K. K. Harrouni’s daughter ridicules Husna for her low family connections and makes her feel useless and worthless. In a reaction to Harrouni’s daughter prejudiced behavior, Husna talks to Harrouni in a loud tone and demands respect and a status equal to her daughter. In response, Harrouni says:

“I can’t have you speak like this,’ said K.K., removing the mask, his face drawn and imposing. ‘You’re upsetting me’. He spoke in a measured voice. ‘You’ve upset me’” (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 120).

In these lines, the character of K. K. Harrouni seems to control Husna according to his own whims and fancies and not giving any importance or attention to her emotions, rather he degrades her to a status of an object.

6. 4. Fungibility

Nussbaum narrated fungibility means “The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types” (Nussbam, 1995, p.57).



Saleema takes refuge in love affair with Rafik who is one of the drivers of Harrouni's family. Although Rafik is already married, aged with solemnity and respected being loyal servant yet he falls abruptly in love with Saleema. Nevertheless, one day, a letter from Rafik's first wife, stating all the routine matters and updates makes him feel guilty and blameworthy. Every single word written in the letter makes him remember the sacrifices that his first wife and children are doing and Rafik plans to go back to his village and thinks to get reunited with his family. Saleema shows her resentment on this decision, to which Rafik replies;

My wife is sixty years old, little girl. She and I have been together for almost fifty. She stood by me, she bore me two sons, she kept my house, my honor has always been perfectly safe in her hands. 'Honor.' Saleema began to cry. 'That's bad. You're tiring of me and this situation. Imagine how it feels for me. (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 43)

These lines unfold the concept of fungibility. Here Rafik being an objectifier treats 'Saleema' as an interchangeable object. For him, Saleema is an alternative for a pastime and a tool of recreation.

6. 5. Violability

The idea behind 'Violability' is that "The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into" (Nussbam, 1995, p. 57). The below excerpt depicts that how male master is exploiting and objectifying the subservient female character. Harrouni in a conversation with his daughter says that Husna is here whenever I need her. This shows that female character lacks an integrity and worth and is reduced to the status of an object.

"At my age, what I need is companionship, and Husna can give that to me. Riffat can only come for tea or for a few hours, but Husna is here whenever I need her" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 119).

6. 6. Ownership

The idea of ownership assumes that "The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc." (Nussbam, 1995, p.57). The following two excerpts have been taken from the short story, "Provide, Provide." In this story, the character of Zainab depicts that how powerless women become an object or an attractive commodity for the men to gratify their physical needs.

"I need you to be here in the house whenever I'm here" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p.62).



“She brought any of her things, clothes and jewelry, her makeup, and put them about the house. Seeing these little tokens of her presence made him happy, made him feel that he possessed her” (Mueenuddin, 2009, p.66).

The text reveals that a woman is being objectified by a male counterpart. Here, the character of Jaglani is the objectifier and Zainab is reduced to the status of an object.

6. 7. Subjectivity

According to Nussbaum’s framework of objectification, subjectivity means “The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account” (Nussbam, 1995, p.57).

Zainab had a love for children, but unfortunately, she could not conceive a child. This very thought of being barren and an infertile woman consumed her thoughts. She wanted a child, therefore requests her husband to adopt a child. The below stated lines divulge that her husband treats her like an object and does not give an account to her feelings and emotions.

I never begged, but now I’ll beg from you. I’ll bow down. I beg you, give me one of your sons’ children to bring up. Shabir has three daughters. The little one, give me her. He has his sons, he’ll still have them and the other girls. The little one is only a few months old, she won’t even know that I’m not her real mother. Give her to me, I beg you, and I’ll never ask for anything again.’ She began to cry, through her teeth. ‘I beg you, I beg you, I beg you. I’ve served you. I belong to you; you know I do. Give me the little girl. Shabir doesn’t even want her, you know he doesn’t.’ He refused. ‘I can’t, my family doesn’t know we’re married” (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 68).

6. 8. Reduction to Body

According to Langton, reduction of body takes place when “one treats it as identified with its body, or body parts” (Langton, 2009, p. 228-229). The following lines from the short story, “Provide, Provide” show that the female protagonist, Zainab is being reduced to the status of an object by the male counterpart.

“Her head scarf would slip down to her shoulders, and he admired her thick black hair, braided and oiled” (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 57).

6. 9. Reduction to Appearance

Reduction to appearance occurs when “one treats it primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses” (Langton, 2009, p.228-229). The below excerpt has been taken



from the short story, "Provide, Provide." In this short story, female character is depicted and treated as an object or a play toy for the male character. The female protagonist has not been depicted as an intellectual being or the one with the agency and autonomy, rather a mere play toy to satisfy the emotional and physical impulse of the male counterpart.

"Zainab by contrast knew how to please him. She wore no scent, but bathed always before he came home and wore attractive clothes" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 57-58).

6. 10. Silencing

Silencing takes place when "one treats it as silent, lacking the capacity to speak" (Langton, 2009, p. 228-229). These lines have been taken from the short story, "Provide, Provide". The female protagonist, Zainab is kept silent in this short story. We can hardly expect any linguistic freedom from her. Most of the times; she is even unable to communicate her basic needs and necessities. And when she finally musters up courage to speak before her master, she was silenced instantly.

"Stop,' he called. He spoke in the voice he might have used with a servant" (Mueenuddin, 2009, p. 58).

Here, the character of Chaudhry Nabi Baksh Jaglani is an objectifier and the female character of Zainab is an object.

8. Findings and Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the text reveals that women are expected to do all the domestic chores and to fulfill the bodily desires of men. It also shows the dependence of women on men. The power, authority and agency have been associated with male, whereas; submission and subservience are associated with females. The male characters are presented as the paragon of supremacy, authority and power and female characters as their reliant. Male are considered as individuals, whereas; women are considered as bodies.

The analysis of the selected short stories also reveals the patriarchal social system that lies in the backdrop of the selected short stories. In Pakistani society, male hold all power and dominance, and women are entrapped in the patriarchal web. They are always in the struggle of getting themselves free from patriarchy. Women are subjugated under the chains of patriarchal social system. From the very childhood, women are socialized in a male dominated society that they are unable to express their true desires linguistically. In addition, they live with unexpressed and ungratified desires. They are considered as the alien members of the



family and are never given sense of ownership. The character of 'Saleema', 'Zainab' and 'Husna' depicts how women in a patriarchal world are mere an object or an attractive commodity for men. In Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story collection, women are presented as sufferers in patriarchal world. The analysis of the short stories presents the stratified Pakistani society that is destroyed by feudal culture and male dominant approach and attitude. These short stories reveal the brutality of the privileged class and sufferings of the poor class. In these short stories, we see women who are double oppressed and exploited because of two reasons. First, she is a woman, and second, she belongs to a lower socio-economic class. Hence, from the analysis of these stories, it is concluded that the features of objectification given by Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton are present in the short stories written by Daniyal Mueenuddin and objectification of women takes place in the three selected short stories of the study.

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