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### WOMEN OPPRESSION IN ASIAN WOMEN POETRY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS ON SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S PERSPECTIVE OF "OTHERNESS"

*Aqsa Saleem<sup>1</sup>, Yousaf Kamran<sup>2</sup>, Noreen Shah<sup>3</sup>, Seerat Mustafa<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Nijat Ullah Khan<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Gomal University, D I Khan

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer of English, Forman Christian College, a Chartered University, Lahore

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer of English, Department of Sciences & Humanities, FAST National University of  
Computer and Emerging Sciences, Peshawar Campus

<sup>4</sup>University of Central Punjab, Lahore

<sup>5</sup>City University of Information and Technology (CUIT), Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

**Aqsa Saleem, Yousaf Kamran, Noreen Shah, Seerat Mustafa, Dr. Nijat Ullah Khan.  
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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the poems "An Introduction" by Kamala Das and "Aqlima" by Fahmida Riaz, two Asian feminist poetesses. In their poems, both poetesses talk about the condition of women as being different and how they are sexually and biologically oppressed. The study's main contention is what types of female oppression Kamala Das and Fahmida Riaz address in their poetry, as well as how Kamala Das challenges stereotypes by making herself a subject and Fahmida Riaz addresses women's identity issues by adopting the persona of Aqlima. This article explored women's suffrage in pursuit of identity and found that women experienced slavery in this patriarchal society just because they have a different body by applying Simone de Beauvoir's idea of otherness to these poems.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Like women around the globe, Asian women also make a remarkable contribution by raising their voice against injustice, which women have been facing for decades. Kamala Das from India and Fahmida Riaz from Pakistan are among those Asian feminist poetesses who talk about women's inequality and oppression. They also tell how women are treated as objects in this male world.

Men have traditionally been seen as having more power and dominance in this world, while women serve as their puppets. They establish the rules for women's lives and force them to abide by them. Men can be found throughout history, whereas women lack a separate narrative to assert their position. Being distributed among males, Raman Selden writes in "A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory" that "women did not have a separate history, no inherent solidarity; nor have they combined as other persecuted groups have" (130).

Men always believe that women, in every perspective, are less than men and take it as a natural defect. According to Susan and Karen, Aristotle also considers women inferior to men and states that "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (422). According to them, it's God who makes women less than men, and they consider it a natural phenomenon. St. Thomas uses words like "imperfect man" and "incidental being" for women. But are they really inferior to men, or is it a constructed phenomenon by men in order to rule the world? Well, that's a big question.

In their poetry, Kamala Das and Fahmida Riaz examine the factors why women are considered inferior and inform the reader that a woman's body is punishing her for being weak; she has ovaries and a uterus, and these abnormalities make a woman a prisoner in her subjectivity. Her survival chances are hampered by these physical differences (422). She is surrounded by borders created by various glands, and she lives her entire life as a prisoner of her body.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The gender issue has received overwhelming attention in the modern era. Das and Fahmida Riaz depict a patriarchal world in which women are marginalised, mistreated, and treated like property. Due to this element, the researcher became more conscious of how oppressed women are in this culture where men have power and how difficult it is for them to define who they are. The study focused on the types of gender oppression that were depicted in their poems and examined how Fahmida Riaz addressed the issue of women's identity by applying Simone de Beauvoir's concept of otherness to both texts and how Kamala Das questioned the stereotypes that society associates with women.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women have started to resist and protest against their oppression in the Third World as well as in Europe and America at the present moment. They speak out and fight against issues like sexual harassment, access restrictions, unfair pay, and domestic abuse, among many other issues that affect both the family and the wider community. Omvedt contends that patriarchy and male chauvinism are to blame for the oppression of women. The subjugation of women by patriarchy results in the exploitation of women's rights in society (30).

Asian societies are predominantly patriarchal because they have a traditional point of view. According to their customs and traditions, "girls are born to be fed throughout their lives" and "boys are born to earn and support the whole family" (Hassan and Niaz). The birth of a baby boy is celebrated equally in the upper and lower classes. Even poor people spent a lot of money on the arrival

of a baby boy. On the contrary, the birth of a baby girl is not welcomed, but the situation is even worse in developing countries, where the girls are even deprived of their basic rights. This gender discrimination in South Asia has led to the second-class status of women in society (Hassan and Niaz). They were not born women, but the social system made them so. Their social standing is the result of societal norms. Therefore, their worth and identity seem to depend on the male members of a patriarchal society. The patriarchal social structure results in women's lack of empowerment, i.e., financial and emotional dependence limit their self-expression and life choices. Her mental health was affected by domestic responsibilities and social and work pressures.

This patriarchal system not only questions women's secondary status, but also gives them the courage to stand up to social inequality (Omved 30). For this reason, many women come out for their rights and speak up against the brutality of society. Simone de Beauvoir's work is useful for feminists because it helps them understand women's marginalized position in the world, as well as how she faces exploitation and oppression in a patriarchal society. (Chiwengo 170). She gives courage to women to seek answers to questions about why they are marginalized and treated as "other." As de Beauvoir claims, "no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (267). According to Shirley Chisholm, "The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, "It's a girl" (brainyquote.com). History demonstrates that male chauvinism and the patriarchal mindset always place women second, resulting in woman oppression. Similarly, some fallacies related to the concept of patriarchy are discussed in Michele Barrett's book "Women oppression today," in which he uses the term "biologism."

It deals with the biological differences between men and women in society. Barrett notes that the word "gender" is used by feminist theorists in order to stress the sociological systems that have been utilising women against them for decades (12–13).

However, according to sociological analyses, majority and minority identities are constructed by the idea of "otherness." In this regard, sociologists first seek to comprehend that identities are frequently something that humans are born with, but that they can also be constructed by societies. Socially constructed identities create opposing binaries in which men believe they are superior to women (othersociologist.com).

The social structure of also leads to female oppression because women are not allowed to live their lives according to their own preferences. Women are emotionally weaker than men, and as a result, they are easily exploited by a male-dominated society. They seek permission in order to fulfill their desires because they are dependent on men. In the social construction of gender in Western as well as eastern societies, our ideas are shaped about what it means to be a "man" or a "woman" (othersociologist.com). It is an inherently unequal relationship between man and woman. As Simone De Beauvoir said, "woman

is defined and differentiated with reference to man." On the contrary, he is not defined with reference to her. She emphasizes by saying that "he is the subject; he is the absolute; she is the other" (17). She lacks identity and exists as an outcast in society.

Many writers and thinkers also talk about women oppression and marginalization by society. According to Andrea Dworkin, men have robbed women of the society they despise. Their bodies are being exploited by male society as they become the object of male sexual desire. They have to fulfill the demands of men, whether they are willing or not. Adrienne Rich also expressed the same feeling in 'Of Woman Born': "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men." "The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (thoughtco.com). This shows the strong impact of patriarchal society, which is based on the biased behaviour of male societies. Women are bound to obey the rules and regulations because they are dependent and have no freedom to make their own choices. Beauvoir also stated that because women are biologically weaker than men, they become objects of condition in patriarchal societies (184).

#### **METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

Kamala Das and Fahmida Riaz's poems, An Introduction, and Aqlima talk about that horrific nightmare in which women are slaves to their own bodies. This study will discuss how Kamala Das and Fahmida Riaz talk about sexual inequality by applying the Simone de Beauvoir view, which she delivers in her book "The Second Sex," but the focus will be on how women in this patriarchal society have a secondary status of "otherness" because of their biological difference from men.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, is famous for her work "The Second Sex," published in 1949. This is a highly influential book that serves as the foundation for entire second wave feminism. If we talk about the first wave of feminism, it was about women's suffrage and property rights, but when we look at the second wave, it has broader concerns than the first wave, including sexuality, family, the workplace, and reproductive rights. All these women issues are raised by Simone de Beauvoir in her book, The Second Sex, "where she outlines the ways in which women are perceived as "others" in a patriarchal society, second to men, who are considered and treated as the "first" or "default sex"" (Maguire). The status of women in society is secondary, and it's a patriarchal society that associates this status with women in order to oppress her. According to Kalantarian, de Beauvoir shares two major concepts with the world: one is the difference between sex and gender, and the other is the rejection of biological difference behind women oppression and otherness (67). Patriarchal society is constructed in order to maintain women position as inferior, and she has no choice other than to follow those roles that men-dominated society constructs for her, but de Beauvoir is the one who refuses to accept those roles that patriarchal society associates with women, like the role of mother and wife.

In her book, there are a lot of things from which we can draw inspiration. One of the most famous lines from her work is "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (The Second Sex). The idea I get from this line is that women are not something we are born with; rather, they are a socially constructed phenomenon. It is a society that teaches women what they should be and how they should live their lives under the conditions that men present to them. Because she is "the second sex" society has decided what roles she can and cannot play.

Simone de Beauvoir was the first to tell us that sex is a biological phenomenon and gender is a socially constructed phenomenon. Raman Seldom, in "A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory," talks about the de Beauvoir work and says that,

"Making the crucial distinction between "being female" and "being constructed as a woman," de Beauvoir can posit the destruction of patriarchy if women will only break out of their objectification." In common with other "first-wave" feminists, she wants freedom from biological difference and shares with them a distrust of "femininity" (120)

She wants liberty from biological differences due to which women are considered inferior to men and treated as such. She also considered her body a cage, due to which she can't get that identity in her society that men have, and by sharing her views in her book, The Second Sex, she tells the world that she wants freedom from that body cage. Women bodies are the reason behind her oppression, and now she wants freedom from that cage.

### ***Sexual Oppression of Women and the Role of Society in an Introduction***

Following India's independence in 1947, a prominent culture emerges in which women begin to demand respectable recognition in society. Indian feminists began writing about the ill treatment they received from society. Kamala Das plays a very vital role in delivering feminist concern and her point of view through her poetry. Women in India are facing many problems regarding the identity issue. Her poem, an introduction, throws light on the lives of women and how they are leading them in patriarchal culture.

In her poem, she depicts modern Indian feminist rebellion in the same way that Simone de Beauvoir depicts the twentieth-century western women's liberation movement (Sengupta). In the first part of her book, Simone de Beauvoir raises a lot of questions in order to investigate why women are oppressed and why they are considered "the second sex." Are women biologically inferior to men? In order to find the answer to these questions, she moved toward ontology, the study of being, and found that women are inferior just because of being women. And society is the one who makes them passive and object like (Scholz).

Simone de Beauvoir, regarding women identity, says that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman." (The Second Sex). Now, from this line, Simone de Beauvoir wants to tell the world that no one is born a woman, but that society teaches her to be one. Because her body was different from his, she was forced

to be a woman and live under the protection of a man. It's a society that constantly treats women as inferior because they have a different body.

The same issue is raised by Kamala Das in her poem, an introduction. In this poem, she used herself as a subject to discuss the culture and behaviour of women in her country. In the start of the poem, she introduces herself by saying that "I can speak three languages, write in two, and dream in one." Now, by telling the world about her speaking ability, she hopes to demonstrate that she, too, possesses the qualities that make men superior to her. She is not less than a man. She has all those abilities that a man has. Then she says that society criticises her for having that quality that makes her equal to man. People make fun of her for writing in English. As in these lines,

*"Don't write in English, they said, English is  
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like?" (Kamala Das)*

She used English in her writing because she is well familiar with this language. But society doesn't even give her the liberty to choose the language of her choice. All her friends and family members criticise her for writing in the language of her choice. They don't like her habit of writing in English because they don't like English. So she says that's why she is not even allowed to write in the language of her choice. Why it is that society decides the rules of women's lives? Why don't they let her do whatever she wants, just like they let the man do in his life?

In the second part of the poem, she discussed her married life. She claimed that even though she was forced to marry at a young age, she was still a child on the inside. It was her body that had grown up, but her soul was still a child. And when she asked her husband for love, he put her in bed and forced her to endure the agony of sex that she was unwilling to endure. Then she said that

*"He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.  
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.  
I shrank pitifully" (Kamala Das)*

She said that he did not beat her, but her body felt beaten. She suffered and feels this pain because of her womanly body. She is totally crashed and wounded from the inside, and all this happened to her because of her body. Simone de Beauvoir raised her voice through her writing on this manly habit. She said that "no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive, or more scornful than the man who is anxious about his virility" (The Second Sex).

Almost all women in the world face this torture from men. According to Susan and Karen in their book *Women, the Family, and Freedom*, women are nothing more than sexual beings for men. "For him, she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated in relation to man, not in relation to her; she is

the incidental, as opposed to the essential. "He is the subject; he is the absolute; she is the other." (422). Men have always viewed women as objects for sexual fulfillment. And Kamala Das was also one of those women who go through this phase of torment. So, after that incident, she began to despise her female body because it had caused her so much pain. In order to escape this pain, she changes her look and makes herself a tomboy, but society again interferes in her life.

*"Then ... I wore a shirt and my  
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored  
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl"*

Her in-laws mock her appearance and advise her to wear the sarees in which they want to see her. According to them, women should dress according to those constructed stereotypes in which they are created, and according to that, women can only wear sarees. Men wear shirts and trouser suits, not women. So we can clearly see Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women cannot be born women. It's a society that forced her to be a woman, and if she goes against them, they criticise her.

At the end, the writer is completely fed up with tolerating the torments of society. She explains her encounter with a man. A man has the freedom to do whatever he wants, but women do not. And when she asked him about her identity, his answer was "I." This "I" allows them to do whatever they want, but when he dies, his fate is the same as women's. So from this, she concludes that she is not different from man and also claims her identity in her poetry by using the word "I." As in these lines,

*"I am saint. I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I" (Kamala Das)*

She stands for her identity and says that the word "I" is not only for men, but women also have the right to claim their identity by using "I." Here, Kamala Das claims her identity by saying that she also has those attributes that make a man "I." She is also a saint and a sinner. Her joys and pains are not different from those of a man. She also has an identity. She also calls herself "I."

### ***Biological Oppression in Aqlima***

Fahmida Riaz is a poetess who talks about the oppression that women face because of their biological differences. She is an Urdu poet best known as a Pakistani feminist. In her poem, she also discusses the identity that women are denied because of their bodies. One of her famous poems, Aqlima, is about the lesser-known offspring of Adam and Eve. Aqlima is the sister of Abel and Cain, but only a few people know about her

In this poem, the poetess explains why Aqlima is not as well known in the world as their brothers are. She discovers that her biological difference from her brother is the reason behind her oppression. Her body is what gives her the status of an outsider in society. According to Shirin Kalantarian, de Beauvoir said that

"the women defined by their biology, their capacity for reproduction, are not considered human beings" (68). But man "thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of a woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (Susan, Karen, 422).

*The question now is, why do women's biological differences make them inferior to men and thus "other"? I think this status of women inferiority comes right from the start, at the birth of Adam and Eve. In Genesis, it is symbolized that Eve is made from "a supernumerary bone" of Adam (422).*

Adam's status was higher than Eve's, and the same was true for their children. Abel and Cain, the sons of Adam and Eve, are known to everyone, but Aqlima, the daughter of Adam and Eve, is known to very few. She is neglected because she has a different body from her brothers. Fahmida Riaz, in her poem, delivered the plea of Aqlima to the world. She said that Aqlima was born of the same mother as Abel Cain but was not as important as her brother because of her body. Whatever she suffers is actually the fate of her body, which every girl suffers in this world. The poetess chose Aqlima as her subject, but she becomes the voice of every woman in our society who believes that women are worthless in the presence of a man. She brings up the main issue of her society by using the name Aqlima to describe how women are considered inferior to others due to their bodies. As in these lines,

*"Why is the fate of her body  
Like that of a well fed sacrificial lamb  
She is a prisoner of that body" (Fahmida Riaz)*

Inferiority is written into the fate of women right from the beginning. No one noticed the existence of Aqlima just because of her body. It's a female body that diminishes her identity. Her body is a cage, and she spends her entire life in it, losing her identity. In other words, the poetess attempts to convince the world that she, too, is a creature. She said that if you look at her closely, she is not a stone. She is a living creature, like you are. She also has an identity. As in these lines,

*"Look at that shadow closely  
Above the long thighs  
Above the swelling breasts  
Above the coils in her womb  
Aqlima also has a head". (Fahmida Riaz)*

In these lines, the poetess emphasizes the existence of Aqlima as a living individual. She says to look closely above her thighs, breasts, and womb; she also has a head like you. She is not unlike you, but it is your way of thinking that has deprived her of everything. She is also an individual and a human being.

## CONCLUSION

In their poems, "An Introduction" and "Aqlima," Kamala Das and Fahmida Riaz discuss women's oppression and their otherness, but their delivery of their ideas



differs. Kamala Das takes herself as her subject and talks about how her husband uses her in order to fulfill her desire. She talks about the position of women in patriarchal society, in which they criticise her at each point of her life and force her to follow the rules that they construct for them. Fahmida Riaz, on the other hand, used Aqlima as a subject and discussed how women are biologically oppressed and, despite being the children of the same parents, are ignored by society due to biological differences.

The common point between Simone de Beauvoir and these poetesses is the discussion of woman secondary status and her position as another. A man always refers to himself as "I," but a woman is referred to as "the other." She remains in an oppressed group and is forced by society to lead her life according to the rules that they decide for her. Men have a prominent place in society, whereas women are always marginalized because of their body structures.

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