

## Articulation, Agency and Embodiment in Contemporary Pakistani Urdu Poetry by Women

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### Abstract

This paper explores the notions of “articulation,” “agency” and “embodiment” in Urdu poetry composed by Pakistani women. Although these terms have been taken from the First world feminist discourses, we aim to highlight how these three terms were not merely reflected in the contemporary poetry of Pakistani women, but rather were used to express their own modalities and associations as they countered the patriarchal system within which they were embedded. Our study does not simply apply these terms on selected poems by Kishwar Naheed (1940-), Fehmeeda Riaz (1946-) and Azra Abbas (1948-), but it also explores how these terms undergo a discursive diffraction as the Pakistani woman is no longer seen as a subaltern entity with a silenced subjectivity. We have taken on board the synonymic idea of writing as an agentic act of embodiment, as theorised by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. This is to show that while these terms were theorised by Western feminists, contemporary Pakistani women writers have, over the last few decades, been enacting these terms in ways which deny the stereotypical projection of the Third world woman in the Western gender discourses. For these women writers, writing enacts embodiment through articulation and thus agentially counters the objectifying gaze of the patriarchal order.

### Keywords

Articulation, agency, embodiment, Urdu, Third world feminism, Pakistani women writers

### Introduction

As women located within Pakistan, for us the Western feminist notions that label the Third world woman as a “subaltern” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 66)

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has been difficult to come to terms with, since in Spivakian terms, it becomes “a positionality without a subject” (*Situating Feminism*). Our concern here, as Pakistani women, is to explore this subject position of Pakistani women, with the term “subject” not being taken in passive terms, i.e., in its etymological relation with “subjection,” or with “being subjected to.” As a matter of fact, we have taken the word “subject” in terms of the active voice where the “subject” is also the “direct agent” of action. Therefore, in our exploration, we have taken subjectivity in the connotations of the act of framing one’s subjectivity as an agentive act of self-actuation through writing. In the context of our exploration, we have opted to explore the formation of this subjectivity on the basis of three key terms: “articulation,” “agency” and “embodiment,” as reflected in contemporary Urdu poetry written by Pakistani women. Since these terms have catalysed debates in Western feminism and between First and Third world feminisms, we have aimed at furthering these debates in order to “pluralize the meaning of difference” (Eisenstein 4) by displaying how these terms underwent a discursive diffraction within the Pakistani patriarchal context within which these agentive women are writing.

In order to conduct our analysis, we have investigated some poems in Urdu by three contemporary Pakistani female poets – Kishwar Naheed (1940-), Fehmeeda Riaz (1946-) and Azra Abbas (1948-) – which we translated ourselves, owing to the subject expertise of the co-author of this paper in the domains of both English and Urdu literatures. We have delimited our analysis to the genre of poetry alone because the poetry of the selected poets offers a cornucopia of thematic paradigms that are relevant to our study. This diversity in themes is of pivotal importance in our theoretical exploration of the three key terms that govern our analysis. One factor that needs to be kept in mind here is that these women are empowered, educated Pakistani women who have access to better financial and social resources of advancement. It is true that the generalisations that we have deduced here are not applicable to all Pakistani women; however, this in turn further destabilises the essentialising tendency of a number of First world feminist discourses. We have not taken the “Pakistani woman” as an essentialist category, since our study is only focused on “Pakistani” female poets and their agentive act of writing poetry. We concede to the fact that the construct of a “Pakistani woman” is variegated, since Pakistani women belonging to different social strata display different agentive manoeuvres. Hence, our discussion is inaugurally delimited to defining Pakistani women’s agency through their act of writing poetry. Moreover, our study is interventionary in the sense that it extends debates regarding the theorisation of the multivalent, “lived experience” (Suleri 252) of a Pakistani woman as it further addresses the “question of alternativism” (Suleri 250) regarding how “embodiment,” “articulation” and “agency” experience a discursive shift within a Pakistani context.

In addition, it is imperative for us to clarify here that in engaging terminology and theoretical paradigms taken from French Feminists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, we are neither getting co-opted within a Western episteme, nor are we talking back to the West and thus further consolidating our peripheral position. As a matter of fact, as Pakistani women focusing on Pakistani women writers writing in their local language, our exploration basically aims at challenging the Western feminist centre and also at presenting our peripheral position as an agentive space. Hence, both the Urdu language and our peripheral positionality are taken as empowering rather than disempowering factors that contest the stereotypical depiction of Third world women in general, and Pakistani women in particular, as passive subaltern women. In addition, since the key terms, “articulation,” “agency” and “embodiment” have remained pivotal in galvanising First world feminist discourses, the discursive diffraction that they experience in being transfused into a non-Western feminist discourse needs to be analysed in relation to First world feminist discourses. It is through the engagement of the terminology of Western feminist discourses, and specifically of French Feminist discourses, that we have worked on the diffraction these terms undergo when placed in an altered socio-political context. Therefore, in fixing our attention on “articulation,” “embodiment” and “agency,” we need to establish some “provisional” origin (“Translator’s Preface” xiii) in order to “allow us to take a stand” (“Feminism and Critical Theory” 77) on two tiers. On the first tier, we will elucidate the act of writing poetry by Pakistani women in relation to their local patriarchal system. On the second level, our analysis will focus on the act of writing, specifically in Urdu, as an agentive act which does not aim at addressing the West, and therefore, lies outside a Western epistemic paradigm. Our argument, therefore, moves from an elucidation of the use of the Urdu language as a means of articulating a Pakistani woman writer’s agency to how her writing re-configures her social alterity within a Pakistani context. It concludes with situating her alterity within the realm of the Urdu language so that both her action and her language negate the Western feminist inferences regarding her subaltern position.

### **The Urdu Language and Female Subjectivity**

As its provisional origin, our argument takes on board the Derridean notion of language as a habitat and a practice for framing an individual’s “ipseity” or I-ness (Derrida 1). With language taken as a habitat, the Urdu language becomes not only an agentive mechanism but also a space within which a Pakistani female poet contours her subjectivity in terms of both articulation and embodiment. However, this Derridean notion of language as an abode has not been borrowed uncritically. In engaging this notion, we have also taken into consideration the Lacanian idea that language is the framing mechanism of the phallographic symbolic order which prescribes all ideologies as well as gender-

roles. In the French Feminist discourses, it is taken as a masculine “speculum” (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 14) that leads to the reification of certain assumptions regarding women’s embodiment. Hence, language is the patriarchal social syntax that leads to the recognition of gender roles, and also serves as a means which “both names and reflects cultural interpretation” (Eisenstein 6). In our study, it is also a habitat which a woman tries to make her own through “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*). It is this dual conception of language – and by extension of writing – as both enactment and space that underlines our notion of the discursive re-configuration of “articulation,” “embodiment” and “agency” in Pakistani Women’s poetry in Urdu. Since Urdu is the spatiality of their enactment, it is necessary for us to engage the tenets of postcolonial Feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Sara Suleri within the framework of our analysis.

With Urdu being institutionalised as a language for the Subcontinent’s Muslims in the colonial era, the exploration of “articulation,” “agency” and “embodiment” is significant in our contestation of the subaltern standing of the Pakistani woman. By placing it within the coloniser/colonised binary of the colonial discourse, a politically weaker entity is deemed to be a subaltern owing to the linguistic barrier between the two. A subaltern is so named precisely because it cannot speak the language of the colonial master. This hegemonic and discursive muteness has traditionally confined Third world women to a position of an inscrutable, and resultantly misinterpreted, alterity. Our argument is that this exile of the so-called subaltern from the discourse of the master does not necessarily relegate him or her to a position of passivity. As a matter of fact, we see her alterity as space of liberatory enactment of the Third world woman’s self in terms of her own social and linguistic situatedness. In our study, we have theoretically re-constituted the Urdu language as an empowering space pushed to the periphery by the British colonial master whose language of power was English. Hence in “situating” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*) Pakistani women and their written embodiment within the realm of the Urdu language, our analysis focuses on how these women frame themselves in terms of their local patriarchal order and in the light of that we postulate that their failure in making themselves understood in the language of power, i.e., English, is neither a failure, nor a passivity. Our thesis is that if language, any language, is an act of agency, then their writing in Urdu is also an act of “*epimeleia beoutou*” or a “concern with oneself” (Foucault 93), since they are able to frame themselves outside the Western feminist discourses. With language and subjectivity being co-constitutive (Schroeder xx), it needs to be kept in mind that not only does the structure and order of language frame the unconscious structure of individuality, but the positionality of their language also governs both the positionality and enactment of their respective subjectivities. That is why if Urdu is also to be re-thought as an agentive space and action in comparison

with English, a Pakistani woman's act of writing in Urdu also becomes an agentive enactment of her embodiment outside the domain of the Western feminist discourse. Hence, the Urdu language becomes a diffractive space that grants a discursive malleability to the Western feminist notions of "articulation," "agency" and "embodiment." In this way, this act of writing in Urdu may be seen as a space for a different "Epistemological performance" (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*) which Spivak defines as a means of constructing objects of knowledge differently. With this logic in mind, we have taken the Urdu language as both a space and an enactment where a Pakistani woman's ipseity or I-ness may be constructed differently in comparison with the way she has been constructed by a Western speculum. She, therefore, becomes a "subject with a positionality," in such a way that neither her supposedly peripheral position from a Western feminist centre nor her engagement with the Urdu language frame her in terms of subalternity.

### **Writing, Feminine Alterity and a Pakistani Woman**

As mentioned earlier, writing remains a patriarchal means of creating reality. It becomes the discursive space prescribing and reifying feminine embodiment through a masculine speculum that aims at consolidating only itself as the transcendental signified. In Lacanian terms, the symbolic order is also the order of language and of the father (Lacan 50). Hence, masculinity and language stand conflated. Neither English nor Urdu are exceptions to this rule. Even in the Subcontinent, Urdu Literature has been primarily a masculine domain within which women had to intervene. Therefore, it may be stated that the material world is read through a masculine representational praxis in any language through which not only is a woman's body colonised, but also her line of sight is co-opted by the masculine gaze mechanics. In these terms, language becomes her undoing since she stands "cathected by tropes" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 143), locked in a *meconnaissance* from which "emanates her impotence to say what disturbs her" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 142). According to the French Feminists, she is trapped in logos, an "organized set of signifiers" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 37) that can both eulogise and demean, consecrate and rape a woman. Even a woman's access to her own body, which has been ontologised through the masculine line of sight, is filtered through the patriarchal discourse that offers no signifiers or "methods of writing" to the feminine desires that convulse through her body; thus denying an important component of her materiality, making "it impossible for her to work out or transpose specific representatives of her instinctual object-goals" (Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* 124). In this context, a woman becomes an émigré in the masculine language within which she has no access to her own body except in relation to the masculine gaze. Her ipseity, like that of the colonised subject, thus becomes inarticulable in itself, requiring the binaristic

relationality of the dominant One and the dominated Other in order to be defined. Within the French Feminist discourse, a woman faces the same dilemma as the French-Algerian Derrida when he says: “I only have one language; it is not mine.” (Derrida 1). In the Western feminist discourse, a woman also has one language and it is not hers.

However, Urdu’s history shows an exception to this rule. Its precursor “Rekhta,” predominantly masculine in tone and syntax, had a feminine counterpart called “rekhti.” These two categories are defined by Carla Petievich in the following terms:

... rekhta is a literature narrated in the masculine voice, its love, idealised rather than purporting to reflect social reality, is ‘spoken’ by a masculine ‘ashiq to a grammatically masculine ma’shuq, and although s/he may in fact be female, explicit reference to the grammatical feminine is avoided. (228)

Rekhti supplants a masculine narrator with a feminine one, since a ghazal in this linguistic mode would be used to articulate a range of issues including homoerotic love in what came to be known as an essentially feminine *Begumati zaban* (Petievich 229), or the language of the ladies. This language was spoken by women within harems or by high-end courtesans. However, this trend faded due to moralistic judgements imposed upon it and is no longer utilised by contemporary Pakistani women writers. Hence, a detailed discussion on the *Begumati zaban* lies outside the ambit of this paper. Moreover, in the current Urdu register, there is only one language which is used by both the men and women of the Indian Subcontinent. This does not mean that being phallogocentric, a woman remains exiled from it and that whatever she says co-opts her voice within a patriarchal code. This aspect needs to be seen from an angle provided by Deleuze and Guattari. According to them, when a minor language, or the language of those who are hierarchally weak, interacts with a major language, the minor language is not co-opted by the major language. As a matter of fact, the major language undergoes a process called a “becoming-minor of the major language” as it is engaged in “deterritorializing the major language” (Deleuze and Guattari 104). Thus, when women intervene within the patriarchal language, they are making it minor by modulating it from the inside. Urdu, like English, is indeed patriarchal, yet when Kishwar Naheed, Fehmeeda Riaz or Azra Abbas write in Urdu, they engage in the “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*) of the patriarchal order which endeavours to place them as a mute Other.

However, in defining a Third world woman as an essentialist, mute and passive subject, the speculum of First world feminism also functions in a similar patriarchal paradigm. It is anchored within the self-claimed privileged position of a Westerner, “out to ‘know’ the ‘East’” (Spivak, “French Feminism in an

International Frame” 155) that homogenises Third world women in terms of producing an “image of an average Third World woman” (Mohanty 214). She is homogenised in terms of an Other – all that we are not – only necessary in terms of how she constitutes and consolidates the superiority of the One, i.e., the First world woman. This sublation of coloured Third world women belonging to different regions and ethnicities remains a crucial point of debate within global and transnational Feminist discourses. The major problem lying within this constructed image of an average Third world woman is that it is either based upon a false assumption of commonality or an equally spurious image of polar opposition, through which, invariably, the construct of a First world woman consolidates itself. By placing the coloured woman, in terms of both her language and embodiment, within an alterity that is extremely reductive, the First world feminist discourse sends a Third world woman within a discursive exile in a manner similar to which a First world masculine episteme discursively extradites a First world woman.

So how does a Third world woman reclaim her language and body within this exilic state of alterity and function within a language and discursive framework that is not hers? While these questions are too vast in range to be comprehensively addressed within the scope of this paper, we have addressed them on two levels, keeping in mind our postulation that writing is both a space and an enactment of a woman’s agency. We have taken agency in the context of writing firstly as “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*) and, secondly, in terms of her intervention through her re-interpretation of the masculine social syntax. In the context of a Third world woman, the space-action dualism of writing gains an added complexity. For a Third world woman, this space of enactment is always-already prescribed both by her local patriarchal order and also by the First world feminist discourse. To re-engage the aforementioned notions of French Feminism, it appears as if a Third world woman is cathected within the tropes generated by the Third world patriarchal and First world feminist discourses.

### **Writing and Embodiment in Urdu Poetry by Pakistani Female Writers**

As has been established earlier, despite being patriarchal, writing and embodiment go hand in hand in framing a woman’s subjectivity. Language, be it Urdu, reifies a woman’s embodiment, its recognition and functionality within the patriarchal symbolic order from which she can find no escape. However, what needs to be foregrounded here is that it is not only women who are irrevocably embedded within the symbolic order and shaped by it; men are also constructed by the operations of the same symbolic order. Yet, being upholders of the law through their proprietary command over language, men assume a centrality within the global gender discourse. This gender discourse, therefore, becomes the semiotic, coding mechanism through which both the masculine

and feminine genders articulate themselves, with the feminine placed at the periphery. With men appropriating and modulating language as a tool for articulating themselves, language becomes a *mise-en-abyme* that endlessly replicates the masculine One. So the question arises: how is articulation possible for a woman in a language that merely sees her as a reflective surface for the One? Irigaray takes the position that being immersed within this signficatory system, a woman “borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them” (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 71), since she can only mimic “reasonable words” as “her body suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her” (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 142). We, on the other hand, object to this argument as we re-view mimicry as an agentive act that may be used to reflect back to the One the image of all its grotesqueness. Extending Irigaray’s mirror metaphor, if the society is a hall of mirrors reflecting a masculine subject, the mirror – in this case, a woman – does have the ability to anamorphically reflect the violence of the One, and thus initiate a process of re-coding gender.

Continuing with this analogy, if writing is a mirror, then we agree with Cixous that

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement... there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and *to foresee the unforeseeable*, to project. (875; italics mine)

Now if the acts of reflecting back and writing are to be taken as being philosophically synonymic, then the ability to distort the image of the One, to show its violence in the very language that instituted that violence, can induce an epistemic shift within the language-based mechanics of the masculine gaze that transcribes a woman. Hence, Cixous’ command that a woman must write her own self is to appropriate a masculine language which, although a break from it is not possible, can nevertheless be used to “foresee the unforeseeable,” and “project” alternative possibilities for the re-construction of the feminine gender through the re-construction of the masculine gender. Moreover, in inveigling into language, a woman becomes agentive since she initiates that re-constitution without denying her need for man. While a number of feminist discourses demand an articulation of the woman’s I-ness in terms of her own self, we believe that the articulation of a woman’s self in relationality to a man (Spivak, “Feminism and Critical Theory” 77) does not necessarily undermine her position any more than it undermines a masculine position as it defines itself in relation to a woman. Both remain mutually constitutive. What is



problematic is the hierarchal placement of both genders vis-à-vis each other. By entering language, a woman engages in “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*) which is defined as “something you do when you learn from inside that what you want to criticize” (Spivak in Brohi) so that the modalities of the creation of the One and the Other are subverted through the very tools of the One. In brief, through writing, a woman can destabilise the masculine One, keeping in mind that if language was used to colonise her body through linguistic *meconnaissance*, she can colonise the same language to re-shape the articulation of both herself and the masculine One. This is precisely the sort of feminine identity that emerges out of the poetry of Kishwar Naheed, Fehmeeda Riaz and Azra Abbas. Their poetry invites a re-cognition of a woman by inviting a re-cognition of man. At times, man is a single masculine entity; at others, it is the entire socio-political substratum within which she is anchored.

The “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*), mentioned above is engaged in by Kishwar Naheed in her ghazal “Main Nazr Aon Har Ik Simt, Jidhar say Chahoon” (I Wish to be Seen from Every Direction, from Wherever I Desire) – the gaze metaphor emanating out of the reflective praxis of a mirror is engaged, but with a discursive shift. In not being confined to merely reflecting the patriarchal order, she uses language to cast the masculine order itself as a reflecting surface that shows her, herself. She thus subverts the masculine gaze mechanics that objectify a woman in terms of himself. If woman, as a mirror, consolidates man, in Kishwar Naheed’s poetry, man as a mirror consolidates woman, as she states:

Restructuring fealty’s code of madness  
When I Love, I love through a cognizance of my self (*Fitna Smani-e-Dil* 73)

Here, the woman is not reflecting masculinity back to man, but gauging her own femininity through the man. Instead of subsuming the erratic syntax of madness within the masculine language of social sanity, she uses the same symbolic syntax to affirm madness as the signifier of her identity. With madness, as Lacan states, lying outside the symbolic order (163) and hence framing the exotic feminine, madness and femininity remain inscrutable within the masculine signification system. Unlike her Western counterparts, Kishwar Naheed boldly draws the masculine language and its code of fealty within the subterranean feminine realm of madness. This realm, being free of the signifiatory constraints of the masculine order, does not merely provide a refuge to the exiled feminine, but also undermines the masculine structure, as Naheed inverts the sanity/insanity binary to proclaim herself in terms of insanity in defiance of the masculine order. Only through re-coding the code of love’s madness for the beloved, is she able to engage in self-actuation. Her alterity, defined in terms of her madness, thus becomes an empowering space.

For her, linguistic and social exile, thus becomes an agentive space.

Not only that, a Pakistani woman writer also unabashedly claims her role as a mirror that wounds man, as Fehmeeda Riaz writes in her poem “*Aao*,” which is an alluring imperative of enticement translated as “Come,” which was published in her collection *Main Matti ki Moorat Hun*.

In the simmering sun I polish the mirror of my body  
You will come  
Collide against the mirror  
And you will be left with a wounded forehead  
I sing  
And I continue polishing the mirror  
Caught within a blind magic  
I call you. (142-43)

Here, we see a Third world brown woman totally aware of the enticing capability of her body. Willingly accepting her role as a mirror, she uses her reflective capability to become inaccessible to man. Her position of alterity and exile from the masculine realm is precisely the catalyst of her empowerment. Instead of the masculine gaze imposing its violence on her, she uses her inscrutable alterity as a protective domain to repel man. Both alluring and repelling, she stands as the embodiment of the exotic that cannot be encapsulated within the masculine discourse. Fehmeeda Riaz’s woman, in Derridean terms, is a woman primarily because she can impel and exceed a man’s desire. In doing so, she is the “double negation” (Spivak, “Translator’s Preface” xxxvi) since her erotic game is her ability to lie outside the domain of other people’s desires. Through this desirable desire, she affirms her agentic hold over man, embodying distance and in this embodiment she ends up regulating masculine desire, instead of letting masculine desire alone frame her embodiment. This distance is maintained through her agentic exercise of choice in a manner that eludes the prescriptive mechanisms of the socio-symbolic order. In embodying herself as the insurmountable distance and embracing her exoticism, she takes the position where she not only judges her own being but also imposes her judgment on the masculine principle. In acknowledging her need of a man, she is not acknowledging her secondary position to him. Rather, in claiming her need of man for herself and in herself, she affirms her bodily needs and her individuality with a boldness that merely reaffirms man’s duty by her, like a “Female Bull Fighter” (Abbas 95). Her words allure him, reminding him of his obligation to her, instead of the other way around. Waving her sexuality like a *muleta* in bull fighting, she reminds a man of his emotional and physical debt to a woman. Her sexuality is not a man’s privilege but his responsibility, an essential element of the Islamic gender discourse prescribed in the Quran which we have touched upon in the conclusion. Thus, by articulating

themselves in Urdu, these writers are able to challenge the local patriarchal order and speak to it in its own language, working through it in order to minoritise it.

As articulation is bound within embodiment, by extension, sexuality is also annexed with articulation. In giving voice to the “infinite richness” of women’s “individual constitutions” (Cixous 876) a Pakistani woman writer presents her own erotogenic constitution, regardless of the taboos imposed upon this mode of articulation by the local, conservative patriarchal order. A Pakistani woman’s poetry defies all barriers of censorship and muteness, thus belying the assumptions that she is a passive subaltern. Like her European, White counterparts, she also presents a “world of searching... a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity” (Cixous 876). However, Cixous claims that even as her psychedelic passions overflowed, language remained a barrier as

I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn’t open my mouth, I didn’t  
repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed  
my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! (876)

On the other hand, a Pakistani woman writer like Riaz does not confine herself within the realm of madness that has no cogent signficatory modality. Resisting this linguistic banishment, she agentively encroaches within the masculine linguistic realm, compelling this language to articulate her unfettered desires. In her poem “*Zabanon ka Bosa*” – translated as “A French Kiss” – Riaz writes:

What fragrance there is in the nectar of the tongues  
This kiss, which releases the fragrance of love’s wine  
This inebriating fragrance that brings a deep, somnambulant intoxication  
What intoxication is this!  
An eye opens in every particle of my mind  
Placing your tongue in my mouth, you extract my subterrestrial life...  
I feel as if  
I am crossing the  
Shivering bridge  
Of darkness  
And now  
Ahead somewhere  
There is light. (151-52)

What comes to the fore here is that the dominant feminine voice shows no qualms in expressing her desire for a man in the language of man. She moulds this language to articulate how her heteronormativity is not an obstacle in defining her ipseity. She channelises it, extending her sexuality as a boon and not as a man’s prerogative. In articulating her body’s “unheard-of songs” she is

able to “repaint [her] half of the world” (Cixous 876). Her sense of womanhood is unabashedly premised on a candid expression of her need, which in a Pakistani context is generally silenced. Language is thus appropriated by a Pakistani woman writer in the agentive act of articulation, as her “subterrestrial life” (“*Zabanon ka Bosa*” 151) is brought forth. Despite living in a society where even an amorous glance at a boy can bring about severe ostracism and even honour killing, talking about a French Kiss in the Urdu language, which is the *lingua franca* of Pakistan, is a bold act through which Riaz reclaims her agency through an act of “representation” (Cixous 879). She thus intervenes into a masculine domain. Her writing becomes a “*new insurgent writing*” (Cixous 880; author’s italics) as she has no feeling of castration (Lacan 216) within which the First world white woman feels herself incarcerated. Unlike her Western counterpart, a Pakistani woman writer boldly claims her sexual need for her male partner, in no way feeling belittled. In her poem “*Abd*” – translated as “Eternity” – she revels in the anticipation of love-making:

What is this ecstasy that makes my body numb?  
What is this pleasure that has burdened each organ?  
What is this state of halting breath?  
What sorts of lustful shadows descend over my eyes...?  
Blow out the lamp now. (Riaz 153-54)

However, this does not mean that a man is only cast in the light of a lover in the poetry of contemporary Pakistani female poets. In their context, man is not merely the masculine gender; it is also the normative symbolic order which ossifies both men and women in the always-already prescribed gender roles.

The intervention of Pakistani women into an articulation of their bodies is not merely through the act of writing. In our analysis, writing and interpretation go hand-in-hand. On one level, Pakistani women writers like Kishwar Naheed and Azra Abbas write on the basis of their interpretation of the social syntax. Consequently, their writing leads to a re-interpretation of the social syntax. This re-interpretation, resultantly becomes a re-configuration of the social order and a critique of a woman’s placement within it. It is through this co-constitutive act of writing and interpretation of the social syntax that a Pakistani woman writer explores. For Zillah Eisenstein, language constitutes “the real by describing and naming it, then interpretation contributes to how the real is known.” (7), so when a Pakistani woman writer appropriates language to make the inarticulable aspects of her embodied sexuality, she engages in “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*). Through this, she induces a discursive deflection in the hermeneutic practices of decoding the social code which induces a deflection in the semiotic, coding mechanism of the gender discourse that we mentioned earlier. For instance, in her poem “*Ainay say Mukaalma*” translated as “A Dialogue with a Mirror,” Naheed interrogates herself in the mirror from a

line of sight that is born out of her own awareness of herself as a woman who tries to look beyond the prescriptive modes of the symbolic, social order:

It would have been better, had you not fallen in love,  
 Unconfined in colour like the frolicking breeze...  
 Wandering, wrapped in a veiled perplexity;  
 Traversing realms,  
 In the desert or in the street.  
 This love lifted you from an exhibit  
 And bound you within a gyrating orbit (*Main Peblay Janam main Raat thi* 76)

However, the mirror here is not used to further consolidate her orbital position which is a gyrating mechanism endlessly affirming the centrality of the masculine One. In directing her gaze at herself, and not at any “him,” in the mirror, she questions the centripetal fetters in which her desire for love bind her. She thus intervenes in the masculine gaze dynamics to see herself and to question her situatedness at the periphery. It is through this act of re-claiming the mirror and engaging it in an introspective dialogue that Naheed reflects the agentive power of her placement. It is not simply by questioning, but by altering the angle of the gaze and the function of the mirror through her use of language, that a Pakistani woman writer is able to hold up the local phallogocentric social syntax to critical scrutiny.

From another angle, our reader needs to be reminded that the gender-discourse within which a Pakistani woman writer is situated is not stained by the Freudian notion of castration and penile lack, which in Lacanian discourse obstructs a woman’s initiation into the symbolic order, with a clearly defined ipseity in herself. This castration complex remains a characteristic feature of a woman’s epistemological performance prescribed by the Western gender discourses. In the Urdu poetry of contemporary Pakistani women writers, man is made to reconsider his masculinity and a woman’s femininity at the same time, without privileging either. This further induces a deflection in the system of relationality through which both genders constitute themselves and each other. This is evident in Azra Abbas’ poem “*Achanak*” – which means “Suddenly” – in which she writes:

Suddenly, if you  
 Place your hand  
 On my hand  
 Making your knees  
 Touch mine...  
 And then  
 If the tissues of my skin...  
 One after the other

Transfer stimuli  
And tell my brain  
Remove your hand  
Remove your arm  
Place yourself at a distance  
And if I slowly slip away  
Then know  
I have become alive. (93-94)

The woman, aware of her ontological separability from man, is able to constitute herself as an individual who is independent of man, through the distance of desire. She directs her desire in the direction of self-actuation, as she turns away from the hall of mirrors. Knowing that her desires are fluid and cannot be confined within the confines of language, her “whirlwinds” of desire continue to disrupt the “solid walls of principle,” contending against the masculine syntax that endeavours to prevent her “from spreading to infinity” (Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One* 109). Kishwar Naheed’s poem “The Grass is Really Like Me” articulates how man levels a woman like grass, restraining her rhizomatic growth to infinity, yet she knows that her rootedness in the earth is what ensures the life of both men and women.

How you strive and endeavor  
to level woman down too!  
But neither the earth’s nor woman’s  
desire to manifest life dies.

Thus, she collides against language through which the self-proclaimed masculine subject inscribes his repetitive “normative judgements on a nature that is resistant to such a transcription” (Irigaray, *This Sex is Not One* 107). Instead of binding herself within the fixity of such a transcription, a Pakistani female poet who is unimpeded by a sense of penile lack, osmoses into the masculine discourse, thus compelling it to question its own fixity through such an agentive linguistic intervention that compels language to re-cast the embodiment of a woman in terms that she desires. She proclaims herself not merely in terms of sexually liberating herself, but also intellectually, acknowledging that she is not merely a conglomerate of beautiful, measurable organs like the breast and the womb, she is also a woman with intellect as Fehmeeda Riaz writes in her poem “Aqleema.” Through language, a woman proclaims herself in terms of her ability to think and to articulate, thus incisively penetrating the masculine discourse to induce a cleavage within its construction of a woman. She proclaims the fluidity of her constitution, in a manner that segues from Irigaray’s who argues that in the social syntax, solidity is equated with masculinity while a woman and her exiled, sinuous desires are

fluid. Irigaray declares that a solid absorbs a fluid and subsumes its instability within its own constraining stability. Our argument is that through the articulation of their mutability, Pakistani women writers undermine the solidity of the masculine discourse, be it in Urdu or in English. In speaking the supposed language of the male, they make it pregnable. In addition, by distorting language through “affirmative sabotage” (Spivak, *Situating Feminism*), they also distort the discursive stability of the masculine One. It is through this agentive enactment that a Pakistani woman writer is able to re-read and re-write the social syntax. Therein lies her agency which gains an added dimension since she is writing in Urdu.

### **Urdu: A Space Exceeding Western Epistemic Paradigms**

By writing in Urdu, a Pakistani woman poet is not merely intervening into the masculine social syntax, she is also subverting the assumption that she is a mute “subaltern” Third world woman. Therefore, in theorising her agency through her act of writing poetry in Urdu, we need to situate her within the habitat of the Urdu language. Although institutionalised by the colonial powers, Urdu enjoyed a fluid liminality as it blended linguistic and cultural stimuli from the Middle-East, South Asia and also from Europe, although it remained exceedingly Muslim in its outlook. Despite linguistic assimilation within English, Urdu remained secondary to English in the colonial times. Within the colonial, binaristic discourse, English as the language of power remained central while languages like Urdu were peripheral, hence binding their speakers within a linguistic alterity and muteness. Our previous discussion has invariably established the fact that Urdu remains an agentive space for the Pakistani woman writer as she speaks and compels the masculine order in its own language, to re-visit the social syntax. This implies that the space of linguistic alterity does not deprive a Pakistani woman writer of her agency. She remains active, in touch with her body and her environment. This leads to two further conclusions: if Urdu as a space of linguistic alterity is not passive but imparts kinesis to the women situated within it, it implies that alterity is not passive nor is linguistic alterity equivalent to muteness. If she can act, speak, be heard and understood through writing in Urdu, and also intervene in the symbolic through it, a Pakistani woman writer is neither mute nor passive, and neither is Urdu the silent language of the subaltern. Not only does her writing in Urdu upend the notion of her being subaltern, it also destabilises the notion that the supposed periphery is silent, mute and unheard.

As a matter of fact, Urdu’s peripheral position to the English language grants it a modicum of freedom from the Western epistemic paradigms. For instance, when Pakistani women boldly confront their male counterparts, they are not placing themselves in a position inferior to the masculine principle. With the official religion of Pakistan, i.e., Islam, telling men to lower their gaze when

they encounter women (“Surah An-Nur” – “The Light,” verse 30, 196), it is the religious discourse that subverts the masculine gaze mechanics and pre-empts the objectification of a woman’s body. In this regard, she attains a certain level of autonomy in her being through religion. Hence, while embedded within such a discourse, a Pakistani woman poet approaches a man from a slightly different angle from her Western counterpart who is ensnared within the idea of linguistic and physical castration. Urdu thus becomes a domain within which a Pakistani woman writer can gain freedom from the Western discourse that defines her as a subaltern on the basis of her regional affiliation in relation to her colonised past, and also as a castrated being owing to her gender. Urdu thus provides her with the domain wherein her peripheral position becomes discursively agentic as she re-constitutes her body and her voice in a terminology that exceeds the Western epistemological performance that defines a First world woman and also allows her to intervene within the immediate symbolic order. In this way, through writing in Urdu, she too becomes a subject with a positionality, unabashedly proclaiming her need for a man, in order to define herself in a language which has the potential to exceed Western epistemological barriers

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