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## The Feminist Stance through Lexical Choices in Discourse

### ABSTRACT

*Feminism, stands for both individual and group activism, to make the social and personal change towards the more advisable culture. By now feminism has sprout many sub branches. This research particularly focuses on feminist stylistics for analysis. It employs Sara Mills' "Three Parts Model" (1998, 2012) for the feminist stylistic analysis of Mohsin's selected novels. Montoro (2014) defines "feminist stylistics" as the sub-branch of stylistics which aims to account for the way in which gender concerns are linguistically encoded in texts, and which attempts to do so by employing some of the frameworks and models pertaining in the stylistics tool-kit. Though feminism is not a new genre to be explored, as it has undergone three waves to reach post feminism but this research is significant in the sense that it applies the "feminist stylistic analysis" to a relatively new genre i.e. "Chick-lit", which has not been focused upon much in Pakistan. In this regard two novels by Mohsin "The Return of the Butterfly", published in 2014 and "Tender Hooks", published in 2015 are selected for the analysis. The analysis put worth astonishing and interesting findings. In Mohsin's novel the practice of suppressing and dominating women is not carried out by men but women themselves where they fragment and objectify their own gender. Undoubtedly women have always been suppressed by a male dominant society but men alone cannot be blamed for it as Mohsin's works prove that women too play a vital role in this act, either by exercising the same discrimination or by silently accepting it.*

**Keywords:** Stylistics, feminism, lexical choices, discourse level, fragmentation, objectification

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## **Introduction**

The relationship between language and its users can never stand alone as language is a means of communicating ideas and believes. Literature has been the most effective medium in this regard where each era is marked by its own style and its own characteristics that influence the people of its time. Postmodern era is different from the previous eras in the sense that it celebrates chance over craft and it has given space to new light hearted genres like chick lit, but it does not mean that it neglects the serious genres. One of them is Feminist stylistics, which is a unique genre of its own kind that would continue to be explored as long as both the genders find inequalities among themselves. In this regard, many researchers have combined both these genres to explore whether this discrimination between the two genders is genuine or is just another stereotypical belief.

## **Significance Study**

The aim of this research study is to observe the language of the selected novels of Moni Mohsin from a feminist stylistic perspective. This research also analyzes how through the lexical choices she has challenged and deviated from the sociocultural norms. Firstly, through the deviant use of language, this research has pedagogical significance where it paves a way for teachers teaching feminist literature, where they can discuss how women can play their part to claim their right to have a language of their own through a lighthearted genre, which does not act as blunt, and offence to many. Secondly, this research in future will be helpful not only for researchers of linguistics but also of gender studies. Thirdly, this study can also pave way to "Translational Studies" of these works if these novels are translated into other languages, it would be very interesting for the purpose of humor as literal translation of proverbs and phrases will result into humorous utterances. This research is an attempt to expose the effort of the writer to reflect a female stance through a relatively lighthearted genre.

## **Research Objective**

1. To analyze how through the lexical choices the author has manifested a feminist stance at discourse level

## **Research Question**

1. How through the lexical choices the author has manifested a feminist stance at discourse level?

## Literature Review

### Stylistics

Paul (2004) defines stylistics as a branch of Applied Linguistics where texts are analyzed and interpreted with reference to their tonal and linguistic style. As a field of study, it brings both linguistics and literary criticism together. Interestingly it does not work as an independent domain of its own, and serves as a bridge between journalism on one hand and linguistics and literature on the other. The application of stylistics includes popular texts, news, non-fiction, popular culture, and religious and political discourse (Paul, 2004).

### Chick Lit

Chick lit deals with the problems related to modern womanhood, in a lighthearted way. This genre of literature became famous in the late 1990s. According to Publishers weekly "What's in a Name? (2001) this genre does have the element of romance but still women fiction (including Chick Lit) is not a direct sub-field of the romance novels because in women fiction the romantic relationships of the heroine are as important to her as her relation with her friends and family.

### Conventional Norms and Female Centric View

Mills (2012) takes into account Leonardi's (1986) point of view on "subject matter" that many critics unfortunately failed to define the female sentence (that reflects female centric view) as the sentence that describes the female experience, and in this regard then the male sentence would, be the one which describes the male experience. Furthermore, from the angle of a post structuralism, one can also question the stance that writing is about experience in the real world. A man who knows the rules and conventions of female writing or *écriture féminine*, can write a book from a 'woman's perspective. Likewise, a woman can then form a "male sentence" (Mills, 1998). This notion became the base of feminist movement where women begin to question their social and political rights and rights to their own lives.

### Research Methodology

This research has taken into account a mixed method approach where the data at hand is analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The data is quantified in order to locate the style of the author and to find the purpose of the repetitive occurrences whereas, it is qualified to explore what it reveals about the practices of the society.

This research linguistically examines the texts at hand from a feministic perspective. To do that, Mills' three-parts model (1998, 2012) is considered. The focus is on the linguistic aspects of feminism.

### **Sample**

Moni Mohsin's two novels "The Return of the Butterfly" published in 2014 in India by Penguin books and "Tender Hooks" reprinted in 2015 in India by Random House India, are selected as a sample. The first reason of taking these two novels as sample is that both the novels fall under the category of Chick and secondly, both the novels share the same theme of social and political satire.

### **Data Analysis**

At discourse level features like focalization, fragmentation, objectification and lexical choices are considered. The characters are analysed based on their description. It is observed how men are described through their appearance and women through their sexual attractiveness and beauty. It is also observed whether their description differs or not, if yes (as stated by Mills) then how; it is expected that the descriptions of facial features and clothes will reflect the overall assessment of the characters in the mind of the readers (Mills, 1998).

### **Character Description**

When we talk about character description, Mills (1998) argues that characters are made of words and reflect the views and opinions which are revolving within society about how women and men appear or seem. There also exists a set of skills, which we as readers have acquired in interpreting the ideological knowledge about women and men which texts provide, particularly at the level of stereotypes. As a result, such knowledge might mean that female and male characters are described differently and this reflects a lot about how a society sees them as the structure of a language affects its speaker's world view (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis).

Mohsin's characters are mostly females (as the genre she is writing in is that of Chick lit, which is specifically about women) though she has male characters in it as well but their involvement in conversations is almost nil). Mohsin has interestingly broken the conventional norms of character description and through stylistic deviation has fragmented men too. We rarely find the description of both males and females in Mohsin's works without adjectives, and in Nofal (2013) view adjectives and nouns function as word complement. Mohsin's protagonist's language reflects this excessive use of adjectives, not just for females but equally for males, which though account for an accurate and keen observation but do not complement them in a positive way.

### Character Description of Male Characters

**Table 1**

***Character Description of Male Characters in “The Return of the Butterfly”***

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
1	Opened necked shirt, Nice sa make-over, Five foottall and thin, short dark Arab husbands, Blonde blue-eyed, Red tie. Diamond cuff lings with white side burns, Jet black head, Middle-aged, big frizzy fundo type beard	1
	Jet black hair, Died hair, Brownish hair, Blue, blue eyes and blonde. Blonde, blonde hair and light si eyes	2
2	Fat man	

**Table 2**

***Character Description of Male Characters in “Tender Hooks”***

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
1	Bald head, skinny little neck white hair, dark skin, Grey curly hairs, Unshaven face and long grey hair uncombed and wild looking, Toad face and small skinny body, had his eyes done	1

Mills (2012) states that the male characters are described in terms of their overall appearance. Little evaluation is made of the character’s body; it does not seem to make a great deal of difference if the hair of the character is red or brown; what is at issue is that these elements signal that the character is a strong person or a person to be trusted. Mohsin’s characters are discussed in the very same way, where the overall description of the male characters is given (mainly hair color, skin color, eye color, height, physique and overall appearance is mentioned) which does not categorize them or discriminate them unlike the female characters. Whereas when we see the description of the female characters, they are fragmented more often, as a result being differentiated based on their nature, physique, appearance and sexual attractiveness.

### Character Description of Female Characters

Table 3

**Character Description of Female Characters in “The Return of the Butterfly”**

S/N	Instances	Frequencies
1	Short skirts and high heels, she is dark, dogger (digger), powers of seduction, in heels and a high pony tail, So catty, so vicious, Bear face liar, tight mini dresses, Silk ka suit with pink lace ka dupatta and pink high heeled sandals, So tacky, so over, Neither khandani nor rich. And not even pretty, American tools (used for daughters), Torn jeans	1

Table 4

**Character Description of Female Characters in “Tender Hooks”**

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
1	She was making sex appeals to him. Girls like that have no pride, you know no shame, Low class type girls are always trying to grab innocent, up class boys... they dug their pointy nails into them.	1
2	gold-digger	2

Unlike what Mills (2012) stated the act of fragmentation in Mohsin’s works is not carried out by males but females themselves. This also reflects the practice of the society where women are being demeaned by women through focalization, where they forget the fact that they are setting a criterion of being judged based on their physical appearance. As a result of which they are unknowingly supporting what men are accused of doing. As we can see in the instances given below how they are being fragmented and discussed by other females instead of being judged as a whole.

The instances in the above tables reveal that if a girl acts all social and talkative, she is considered to be clever and if she stays away from such gatherings then she is considered an outcast and rude. No matter what, she is going to be judged for sure, as we see the protagonist observing Zenat’s (friend) daughter Tanya (who is a quiet girl) and says:

She also didn’t wear makeup. She wasn’t like other girls because she was least bothered to make good impression on other people (57.13)

So if a girl wears makeup it is generally assumed that she wants to make an impression on others.

The most frequently used word is “gold digger” which has a wrong connotation associated with it as it is used to describe a woman who is after a man’s money whereas there is no such word for a man. This also reflects how a society discriminates both the genders buy judging the females only though both the genders constitute an equal part of the society.

In Mohsin's works we also find a lot of adjectives being used for describing both the genders and according to Nofal (2013) adjectives work as subject complement but in Mohsin's works, it is not the case always. As Mohsin's characters have been mostly objectified, fragmented and demeaned by the other characters in the novels.

### Fragmentation

**Table 5**  
**Fragmentation in "The Return of the Butterfly"**

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
1	Streaked hairs and permanent glued lashe, False lashes, Many hairs and braces, False lashes and penciled eyebrows, Short skirts and high heels Plumpish, Frizzy hair and crookedteeth, Pimpily, thin and pretty, Chests like <i>gao takias</i> , Tight shirt and tight hair, dark , Tight sa bun..and halki si lipgloss, Jagged teeth, Stealgrey hair, Black, Undied hair, Tall, good looking, wheatish complexion, Mascarad eyes, Darkish colour, smallish eyes, longish face, Short hair, Ragged hair, False eye lashes and their pumped lips	1
2	Fat	2

**Table 2.2. Fragmentation in "Tender Hooks"**

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
1	Tight, Big busts and wobbly hips that juggled as she walked, Split tongue, Fourhead smooth. Cheeks smooth. Neck smooth. Hairstreaked golden and brown, Frizzy hair, lose si jeans hanging from their hips as if they had a huge soaking pamper, Busty one, the big bottom? Dimpily smile, Planish. High pony tail, slim, whitish coloring, longish nose, Dark, Cheap cloths? black as coal or a hunch back, Bouncing bottom like a basketball, Fat white arms, Whitish complexion, a fair girl, Long nose. Big mouth and dimples...no plunging neckline, Nose didn't look so long and face not so bony, not a beauty from anywhere, Young looking, long loose hair	1
2	Fat	2
3	Dwarf daughter	3

### The Return of the Butterfly

According to Mills (2012) fragmentation of females is associated with male focalization—the female represented as an object, a collection of objects, for the male gaze. But in Mohsin’s novels interestingly fragmentation is associated with “female focalization” where the females are the ones who are observing this practice. In Pakistani socio-cultural context the females are not generally aware of the act of focalization, where they are not only focalizing other females but their own selves too, taking it as a matter of pride not knowing that their worst weakness is their very own attractiveness (Denopra, 2012) that makes them the object of “male gaze”. As the protagonist herself says that she had frizzy hair and crooked teeth (101.12) but she worked on herself unlike her class fellows who could not maintain themselves and have become all fat.

The discrimination between the genders is still exercised even in today’s world where the criteria for marriage differs for both genders. If a woman is divorced, she faces a lot of hurdles to get married again and mostly she is considered responsible for the separation whereas when it comes to a man, it is very rare that he would be blamed for it. Even when Jonkers himself being a man tries to remove this discrimination, the protagonist reminds him of what the society would think, to which we are bound.

### Tender Hooks

‘For a thirty-seven-year-old heap of soiled goods like me?’ (20.24)

‘Men are never soiled, Jonkers, only women.’ (20.25)

In the following instances this discrimination is more visible where whether her son is best or not the mother wants the best girl for him.

Aunty Pussy wanted Jonkers to make a big marriage, na, to **nice, rich, fair, beautiful type** from an old family...whoever she saw **wasn’t rich enough** or **beautiful enough** or **fair enough** or **khandani enough** (13.30)

As we can see that Aunt Pussy, while finding a girl for her son desires perfection in the girl from every angle forgetting the fact that her own son is a thirty-seven years old, divorced man and even for him she thinks the girls are not pretty rich “**enough**” to be considered. This also reflects the dilemma of Pakistani society where men are indeed considered the better ones and females, no matter what treated as second to them. Though, he himself is not a good looking man, but that is not the criteria for men in our society, our society gives importance to their earning and wealth. As he says,

‘But I’m not rich...I’m not, you know stinking rich (20.29)

I probably *am* dull Jonkers is so behind everything (21.12)



## Objectification

Talking about objectification Mills (1998) states that, the body is depersonalized, objectified, reduced to its parts. Fragmentation of the female is therefore associated with male focalization—the female represented as an object, a collection of objects, for the male gaze. Surprisingly, Mohsen’s characters break the norms, where women are the object of their own fellow “women’s gaze”. Men are generally considered symbol of pride and honor in Pakistani context. As the writer herself has reflected this ideology through the protagonist’s belief where she says:

**Boy is still boy.** However modern you get you have to admit that boy *ki apni hi baat hoti hy..*people take you more seriously if you have sons, na. (215.6)

The following instance reveals the true position of a female where generally a woman’s worth is judged by her status in relation to the male members of the family; where she might be not that worthy if she is just a mother but her status elevates abruptly if she is the mother of a “son”.

people do much *izat* of me **because I am mother of a son** (215.11)

In “The Return of the Butterfly” we again find the protagonist saying:

I *tau* have only one child (son) and he can’t remain childless. She has two granddaughters but they also **don’t count**, na. (68.9)

**Table6**  
**Objectification in “The Return of the Butterfly”**

N/S	Instances	Frequency
1	Poor <b>thing</b> , pretty young <b>thing</b> in heels, delicious <b>khandani</b> cake that I am. I was a <b>cake</b> what sort of cake would I be?, I wouldn’t be a <b>pound cake</b> or <b>plain cake</b> or..... May be <b>Red Velvet</b> . Or <b>Angel Cake</b> . Or <b>Double Delicious Vanilla Cupcake</b> . I asked Janoo and he said, <b>Fruit Cake</b>	1

## Tender Hooks

Another striking feature that Mohsin’s novels reveal is that women are not just the objects of “men’s gaze” but “women’s gaze” more. Where the elder females see the young girls as objects to be displayed, judged, liked and bought. Mohsin has reflected a dilemma of the Pakistani society where females themselves objectify their own gender instead of standing against this notion. Even when one of the male characters accepts that he is too old to get married again, his cousin reminds him of his worth in comparison to women in the eyes of the society.

‘For a thirty-seven-year-old heap of soiled goods like me?’ (20.24)

‘Men are never soiled, Jonkers, only women.’ (20.25)

The female characters themselves surrender to the conventional social norms and objectify their own fellow women considering them an object to be displayed and bought, thus encouraging this discriminating practice. Lexical choices like “chasing”, “down market”, “shopping list”, “window shopping” and “short list” “stalks”, “unload”, “do number ka maal”, “final purchase” make her no less than an object or an item on sale.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) asserted that women at varying degrees often internalize this outsider view and perspective and begin to self-objectify by considering themselves as an object to be looked at and to be evaluated based on their appearance. As Harris (2010) rightly stated that “we (women) do this to ourselves” just as we see in the following instances how women themselves are objectifying women as if they are items on sale to be purchased and consumed.

**Table 7**  
**Objectification in “Tender Hooks”**

N/S	Instances	Frequencies
	Shumaila was <b>down market girl hunting</b> . <b>Chasing</b> the wrong types. make a <b>shopping list</b> (of all the most illegible girls).. <b>window shopping</b> before making a <b>short list</b> and <b>final purchase</b> . <b>Stacks</b> of them (girls) together?for that <b>do number ka maal</b> . <b>Thing</b> (girls) <b>Second hand</b> . <b>Unload</b> her dwarf daughter. To <b>drive up her price</b>	1

## Conclusion

At discourse level the research explored how the lexical choices described the characters in the novel. When we talk about character description, Mills (2012) is of the view that male characters are described in terms of their overall appearance and little evaluation is made of the character’s body. The same thing is reflected in Mohsin’s novels but what differentiates it from Mills’ stance is the brutal fact that the ones fragmenting and objectifying women are not men but the women themselves. Women have become the object of “female gaze” who focalize and objectify them; as if they are an item placed in a shop to be bought. We see terms like “girl hunting”, “short list”, “final list”, “down market” and “final purchase” used by females while selecting brides for their men which makes their worth appear no less than that of an object. In Pakistani socio-cultural context unfortunately the criteria for a perfect bride based on her attractiveness is not only set by men but

supported by women too; where they focalize and objectify them based on their physical traits and attractiveness instead of taking them as a whole. This also reflects a harsh reality of society where the criteria of marriage for both men and women differs, as the protagonist says:

'Men are never soiled, Jonkers, only women.' (20.25)

Though her cousin Jonkers is also divorced, but he is not being judged for it, whereas women (like Farwa; who is the daughter of the protagonist's friend and who is divorced, is constantly called draft because of her short height instead of being appreciated for being a religious girl). In Pakistani socio-cultural context generally women are the ones who are mostly considered responsible for separation and are questioned. A man is never judged based on his physical attractiveness but only on the basis of his earning but even when a girl desires to know how much he earns, words with negative connotations, like "gold digger" are associated with her. This way or the other, she is the one to be blamed and judged. As Supriyadi (2014) rightly said, "women being poisoned under women" for such practices which continue to exist in a society.

Adjectives were dominant in female sentences when it came to character description, as Nofal (2013) calls this use of adjectives as subject complement but in Mohsin's works it does not work as a subject complement but rather were used to demean the subjects who are mostly women on the basis of their appearance and physical attractiveness. On a brighter side they do add to the semantic richness (Nofal, 2013).

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