

# INTERPLAY OF GENDER, POWER DYNAMICS, AND RESISTANCE IN SA'ADAT HASAN MANTO'S *HUMILIATION* AND SABYN JAVERI'S *RADHA*: A COMPARATIVE FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

The current study aims to conduct a comparative feminist analysis of "Humiliation" and "Radha," written by Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Sabyn Javeri, respectively. Although set in different cultural contexts and periods, the two works explore female agency and the power dynamics within patriarchal society. This study examines how Manto and Javeri critique patriarchal structures and female oppression through feminism, drawing on de Beauvoir's (1949) concept of *The Other*, Butler's (1990) sexual agency, and Hooks' (2000) idea of resistance. Both stories depict and critique how patriarchy shapes women's destinies as inferior counterparts through violence and exploitation. The experiences of power, victimization, and the ultimate resistance of the female characters in both stories differ over time; however, these experiences are rooted in the same oppressive patriarchal systems that seek to control and define them. Both Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Sabyn Javeri, as committed feminist writers, offer keen insights into the gendered and complex structures of society, making their respective stories significant texts for feminist literary analysis.

**Keywords:** Resistance; Gender; Power Dynamics; Feminist Literary Theory.

## Introduction

The long-standing relationship between men and women, dating back to earliest times, has often involved ongoing power struggles (Lerner, 1986). Over the ages, men have used various strategic—and sometimes manipulative—tactics, including deception, institutional control, and cultural exploitation, to sustain their dominance (Connell, 1987). This pattern of systematic domination aligns with Herbert Spencer's (2020) concept of "survival of the fittest," where dominant groups exert power over subordinates through both open and hidden means (Darwin, 1912).

Men have maintained their privileged status by shaping key societal institutions such as media, religion, legal systems, economics, politics, and education, which are often rooted in specific narratives (Bourdieu, 2001; Foucault, 1977). In many societies, men are generally positioned higher in social, economic, and political hierarchies, with more access to resources, roles, and expectations, highlighting the difficulties women encounter (Kamram et al., 2023; Anwar et al., 2023; Bibi et al., 2021). These institutions are crucial in reinforcing patriarchal norms, limiting women's autonomy and agency by favoring men and controlling women's roles (Murray, 1990; Anwar et al., 2025). This dominance is intentional and part of ongoing efforts to uphold gender-based hierarchies in society (Millett, 1970).

Literature genuinely mirrors life, providing an essential perspective to analyze power relations between men and women. It often appears through instances of physical, sexual, or emotional

harm, or by marginalizing the subaltern (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Anwar et al., 2022). Across different cultures and throughout history, stories consistently depict conflicts and tensions between male dominance and female resistance (Showalter, 1977). Whether from mainstream works or marginalized voices, literary portrayals frequently reflect—and sometimes critique—the social and political realities of gender inequality (Butler, 1990). Therefore, examining world literature shows that the struggle for dominance between the sexes is more than a recurring theme; it signifies ongoing and evolving power dynamics (Cixous, 1975).

The literature of the Indian subcontinent provides an authentic and realistic depiction of struggles for power and resistance, addressing concerns about cultural identity and representation by challenging dominant cultural narratives and reclaiming Pakistani culture and traditions (Kamran et al., 2023). Among this literary tradition, Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Sabyn Javeri stand out as two undeniable icons. Being true and ardent feminists, Manto and Javeri champion the cause of the oppressed and marginalized factions of their contemporary societies.

Originally published in the Urdu language as *Hathak* (1941), this paper utilizes the 2013 translation *Humiliation*, done by Mushtaq-ur-Rasool Bilal. This short story has been analyzed alongside Sabyn Javeri's *Radha* (2019), a contemporary short story anthologized in her collection *Hijabistan*. Though written in different cultural, social and political milieus by different authors, these short stories extensively explore women's struggle for female agency, gender equality and sexuality with undaunted zeal. Of the two, Sa'adat Hasan Manto, writing during and after the British India (early 20th-century), masterfully depicts the economic, emotional, and psychological violence against his female protagonists, like Sogandhi under the patriarchal systems, while simultaneously illustrating how these female protagonists steer through social restrictions to ultimately reclaiming their identities and autonomy (Gopal, 2005).

Almost a century later, his successor Sabyn Javeri explores the same themes, analyzing how modern women continue to face and challenge deep-rooted patriarchal oppression in their relentless pursuit of sexual autonomy (Butler, 1990).

The current study borrows the feminist lens based on Butler (1990), Crenshaw's (1991), and de Beauvoir's (1949) theories, demonstrating how both Manto and Javeri, during two different eras and climes, critique and challenge patriarchal gender norms through their female protagonists to show their resilient spirits to not only resist patriarchal exploitation and also to assert their female agency in their contemporary oppressive societies.

Feminist themes are vividly woven into the very fabrics of both *Humiliation* (Manto, 2013) and *Radha* (Javeri, 2019). These works are set in patriarchal milieus, depicting two sex workers, Sogandhi and Radha, who face humiliation and violence at the hands of men, thus representing patriarchal power and male agency. Despite the male supremacy, they struggle for female agency by challenging and resisting male dominance. In *Humiliation*, male characters like Maadhu and Seth, symbolizing patriarchy, inflict emotional and financial exploitation. Likewise, in *Radha*, Malak Sab, his unstable son Nisar, and his driver become agents of patriarchy and therefore inflict humiliation on Radha.

### Research Objective

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To extract relevant passages and to analyze their theoretical and thematic insights about gender, power, and female agency from the short stories *Humiliation* and *Radha*.

2. To critically examine the selected texts for identifying and explicating the convergent areas to see how both texts depict and treat gender dynamics, power structures, and women's resistance.
3. To examine the correspondence between gender, power, and resistance in both *Humiliation* and *Radha* through a feminist lens.

### Literature Review

Multiple yet separate studies have been conducted to analyze *Humiliation* (2013) by Sa'adat Hasan Manto and *Radha* (2019) by Sabyn Javeri from various standpoints. Bredi (2001), in her monumental study, conducts a detailed comparison between Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Mirza Hadi Rusva. The work eulogizes both writers and their contributions to the Indian subcontinental literary legacy. In her analysis of *Humiliation* (*Hatak*), Bredi highlights that Manto's females are depicted as submissive and suffering beings. However, her discussion does not include a strong feminist perspective.

Riaz (2018) in his thesis emphasizes the complexities inherent in translation. Although this work is very important, it largely ignores discussion of feminist elements in Manto's works. *Radha* by Sabyn Javeri, though a work of fiction, relies heavily on real people and events. However, no major work has conducted a critical analysis of *Radha* to explore feminist undertones. Claiming that no work has been done is too broad; still, a comparative study of current importance remains unfinished. Other works of different types have been produced, such as the one by Shah et al. (2023), which highlights radical feminism in Javeri's short story collection *Hijabistan* (2019). Although lacking a sharp focus, this work is general and not centered on *Radha*, the subject of the current study.

Khan, Ahmad, and Iqbal (2023) examined Javeri's short story "Adulteress" from a Marxist feminist viewpoint. Their research provides valuable insights into Sabyn's work but has a limited scope. Other important studies, such as Shah & Ashfaq (2024) and Batool, Parvez, & Farooq (2021), analyze the politics of hijab in Pakistani society through "Hijabistan." While related, these studies differ because they focus exclusively on Sabyn Javeri's short story collection "Hijabistan" and are not intended for direct comparison with this study. Additionally, Qasim, Afzal, and Ali (2024) make substantial contributions by analyzing "Hijabistan" from a patriarchal perspective, considering Sabyn Javeri's entire collection. This opens opportunities for future research to explore individual or comparative analyses of Sabyn's works.

### Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study uses a feminist theoretical approach, combining Butler's (1990) gender performativity and Crenshaw's (1990) intersectionality to compare two texts. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) guides the overall structure. The researcher analyzes how Manto's short story "Humiliation" (2013) and Javeri's "Radha" (2019) portray the brutal realities of gender-based violence and victimization, emphasizing female agency within social contexts.

As previously noted, this study employs a qualitative research method to systematically examine the main texts—\*Humiliation\* by Sa'adat Hasan Manto (2013) and \*Radha\* by Sabyn Javeri (2019). The analysis is supported by secondary data from carefully chosen scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reputable digital archives. The focus is on a detailed textual analysis of these two short stories, highlighting their thematic elements and feminist discourse. To strengthen the literary critique, secondary data were selected from reputable academic sources, mainly high-impact peer-reviewed journals in literary and gender studies, along

with scholarly books and volumes from well-known academic publishers and reliable online repositories. Only sources meeting strict academic standards were included to ensure rigor and relevance to the theory. Recent publications were prioritized to reflect current debates in feminist literary criticism. Digital data were cross-checked with print sources to verify accuracy before final use.

All cited sources have been accurately attributed to their respective authors and researchers, adhering to academic citation standards. Following the canon of scholarly integrity, the current study avoids using unauthentic and poor references.

The study, utilizing a feminist lens, investigates gender-based oppression and inequality, and power dynamics in the stories, *Humiliation* and *Radha*. The study combines Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism on female otherness, Judith Butler's Gender Performativity theory on subversive resistance, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality into a feminist lens to analyze the major manifestations of oppression adeptly depicted in both works. Patriarchal dominance is presented through institutional violence in the story *Humiliation*, whereas modern sexual and economic pressures find powerful expression in Javeri's story *Radha*. Both stories also portray female rebellion, though covert and symbolic. In *Humiliation*, it is shown through Sogandhi's transgressive actions, and in *Radha*, through Radha's gestures of independence. Though spatially and temporally distant, both narratives demonstrate the intense presence and workings of patriarchal systems, thus underscoring the dire need for feminist literary analysis to address systemic oppression and acknowledge acts of resistance, though at times insignificant. This proposed approach demonstrates how class, gender, and power relations mold female experiences in these texts.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Gender, as a social construct and performance, serves patriarchy as a tool, methodically reducing females to an inferior, positioning them within a rigid hierarchical pattern (de Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). Through performative acts that level gendered hierarchies (Butler, 1990), this concept is utilized to validate women's subjugation, perpetuating male dominance and curbing women's agency. De Beauvoir (1949) famously stated that "*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*," thus stressing that gender is a constructed and imposed identity that relegates female bodies to inferior performances. This systemic differentiation elevates masculinity while diminishing femininity, allowing patriarchal mechanisms to control and discipline women's lives, affecting their social mobility and bodily agency.

This section examines how Manto's *Humiliation* (2013) and Javeri's *Radha* (2019) portray the fundamental mechanisms of gendered oppression. It highlights the extensive influence of patriarchal exploitation and the subtle areas where women oppose these structures. Through feminist theory, the analysis shows how gender acts as a tool of dominance that is both questioned and maintained in these stories.

### **Gender: Representing "the Other" in *Humiliation***

In Manto's 'Humiliation,' Sogandhi challenges traditional gender roles by being a known prostitute. Despite her professionalism—pleasing her clients with slight dissatisfaction over the last five years (Manto, 2013, p.281)—she remains vulnerable to exploitation as a woman. Her lover, Maadhu, has sex with her and takes her money during his monthly visits. Although he pretends to love her, his hypocritical actions show he never intends to marry her, as he disapproves of her work (Manto, 2013). Sogandhi faces double marginalization as both a woman and a prostitute. Meanwhile, Ram



Lal, a pimp involved in prostitution, does not experience the same contempt from his clients as Sogandhi does. In fact,

### **Gender: Representing “the Other” in *Radha***

The inspiration for *Radha* by Sabyn Javeri (2019) appears to have drawn directly from Manto's *Humiliation* (2013). Unlike Sogandhi, Radha (Ruqaiyah) is an undercover sex worker who works as a model with an ad agency. To support her studies and family, Ruqaiyah enters the advertising industry but is soon dragged into the sex industry by one Riaz Uncle (Javeri, 2019). During her visit to the residence of Chaudry Sahib, she is humiliated and violated by his mentally deranged son. Bruised and shattered, she is further insulted by the driver, who masquerades as a sympathizer and well-wisher. She, like her predecessor Sogandhi, is doubly marginalized. Initially, Radha wishes to live a financially independent life, supporting both her studies and her family. However, finding her to be needy and beautiful, she is dragged into sex work by Riaz Uncle and the likes. Later, she becomes a plaything in the hands of menfolk like Chaudry Sahib and his mentally deranged son. Though struggling to break the financial bondage of males, Radha is still at the mercy of menfolk (de Beauvoir, 1949).

### **Patriarchal Power Dynamics: Violence in *Humiliation***

In Manto's *Humiliation*, the power dynamics are depicted through the economic exploitation of Sogandhi by Maadhu, who visits her once a month and emotionally manipulates her to take as much money as he can. This exploitation of Sogandhi occurs because she is easily gullible, falling for Maadhu's false promises of marriage that appeal to her emotions, imagination, nature, and individuality; she rejects traditional rules (Manto, 2013; Kamran et al., 2023). Had she not been socially dependent, Sogandhi would have lived a financially independent life, thus saving herself from violence. In the story *Humiliation*, a woman's body is treated as a site of male dominance and gratification, stripping her of her subjectivity. Manto critiques how women are often dehumanized and portrayed as mere objects for male sexual gratification, with little regard for their autonomy or dignity (Crenshaw, 1991). As is evident from the description at the start of the story Sogandhi is shown with jounced “ribs and bones” left by “the Sanitary Inspector of the Municipal Committee, called Seth” (Manto, 2013, p.272). The violence inflicted on Sogandhi is not just a single attack on an individual but a reflection of stronger societal structures that empower men over women. This situation aligns with the concept of “the Other” by Simone de Beauvoir (1949).

### **Patriarchal Power Dynamics: Violence in *Radha***

Sabyn Javeri's *\*Radha\** (2019) provides a powerful look at how institutional patriarchal control oppresses, with male figures systematically shaping Radha's destiny and making her independence appear an illusion. The story illustrates how interconnected structures of gender, class, and authority work together to maintain her subjugation (Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1984). Her sexual and economic exploitation begins with Riaz Uncle, who coerces her into sex work by taking her virginity—an act that underscores the patriarchal tendency to commodify female bodies (MacKinnon, 1989).

Radha appears to live independently as a kept mistress, but her survival relies on male support. This mirrors Gayatri Spivak's concept of the “subaltern's limited space for action within oppressive systems” (1988). Chaudhry Sahib's dismissive attitude toward her efforts to contact him during harsh weather underscores his sense of entitlement as a male benefactor, reflecting societal norms that uphold female disposability (Butler, 2004).

The scene with Nisar, Chaudhry Sahib's mentally unstable son, reveals the complete vulnerability of women like Radha. The metaphor of the "submissive lamb" (Javeri, 2019, p. 31) suggests sacrificial imagery, illustrating how patriarchal systems force women to silently accept violence. The narrator's comment, "there was no place to run" (ibid, p.31), supports theories of spatial and social confinement under patriarchy (Phadke et al., 2011), where women from marginalized backgrounds are denied safety or escape.

The disrespect Seth's driver shows to Radha, forcing her to cross muddy ground between her gate and the car, illustrates how men of lower social standing wield gendered power over women, deeming them socially inferior. This aligns with intersectional analyses of how masculinity hierarchies operate across class lines (Connell, 2005), as the driver's teasing reflects his male privilege, albeit constrained by his own class.

### **Female Agency, Autonomy, and Resistance in Manto's *Humiliation***

Sogandhi's lack of agency is central to Manto's short story *Humiliation* (2013). Her victimization by characters like Maadhu and the affluent businessman demonstrates the complete absence of power women hold, leaving them at men's mercy in a male-dominated society. Manto's keen critique not only addresses a male character but also underscores the broader social systems that uphold gender violence against women (de Beauvoir, 1949). The misogynistic attitude denies women any agency to resist gender violence or pursue justice, aligning with Shulamith Firestone's idea that women's emancipation requires a fundamental transformation of the societal structures that oppress them (1970).

Sogandhi, the central character in *Humiliation*, initially lacks agency because she is helpless against Maadhu, who attacks her every month to steal her money. Similarly, when Ram Lal wakes her up at 2 a.m. to go see the wealthy client, she agrees despite her headache and fatigue. She remains silent when the client rejects her due to her poor looks (Manto, 2013).

Towards the end, Sogandhi, by driving out Maadhu and throwing the photos of her lovers out of the window, advances towards emotional autonomy (Manto, 2013). At this juncture of the story, the timid Sogandhi of the previous pages disappears, and a bold, independent, and confident Sogandhi appears. She lets go of the thought of avenging the Seth who humiliated her that night;

*"To hell with it. Why bother! Let's go home and sleep it off. What's the use fighting! An unnecessary bother. Let's go home Sogandhi. Drink a bowlful of water, rub a little balm on your forehead, and sleep it off. You'll have a sound sleep and everything will be all right. To hell with the Seth and his car"* (Manto, 2013, p. 282).

Her sense of agency and autonomy peaks when, feeling her life is purposeless and meaningless, she falls asleep with her scabby dog beside her. Through this act, she asserts herself and her resistance (Butler, 1990).

### **Female Agency, Autonomy, and Resistance in Javeri's *Radha***

In Javeri's *Radha*, the protagonist exhibits a paradoxical form of limited agency that evolves within a patriarchal system. Despite facing ongoing harassment, violence, and sexual abuse, Radha's subtle acts of resistance affirm her sense of self. Her interactions with the driver initially appear confident and performative, with ironic hints, but her efforts to assert agency are met with insulting remarks that emphasize her subordinate status. The most significant act of self-affirmation occurs when she repeatedly states her name after overhearing the driver's derogatory comments – a quiet

yet powerful move to reclaim her identity, illustrating Butler's (1990) idea of performative resistance. Despite its seemingly insignificant nature, the gesture attains great symbolic nuances, signifying Radha's resistance and recognition of her true self and determination not to be eradicated as an insignificant being by the oppressors. As a whole, the cited passage signifies that though a female agency may be incomplete, it, however, indicates a delicate and continuous act of proclaiming self-assertion and identity within a patriarchal setup that always seeks to eliminate female agency and identity.

### Findings and Conclusion

The current comparative study analyses Sa'adat Hasan Manto's *Humiliation* and Sabyn Javeri's *Radha* from a feminist perspective, underpinning patriarchal power dynamics and common patriarchal patterns in the depiction of gender-based oppression across ages. This analysis reveals that, though they take place in different historical contexts, both works lay bare the core structures of patriarchy that put bars on female freedom. The two stories depict the same structural victimization of the main female characters who are intimidated through institutional sexual and social control, thus signifying MacKinnon's (1989) theory of *Patriarchal Appropriation*. However, the study reveals differences in the limited manifestation of female agency through Sogandhi's quiet fortitude, hinting at the scant options available in mid-20th-century contexts. On the contrary, Radha's more confident and bolder stance exemplifies Mahmood's (2005) idea of "agency within subordination" in modern settings. This proposes that traditional feminist binaries of victimization and empowerment are increasingly complex, revealing multiple adaptive responses to institutionalized oppression.

The current research endeavor attempts to highlight the intersectional dynamics of a patriarchal society. Manto, an early twentieth-century feminist, analyzes the issues of class and gender in his story *Humiliation*. Sabyn Javeri, on the other hand, deals with the complex marginalization of lower-class sex workers, aligning with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional framework. The comparative analysis done here in this paper highlights how patriarchy maintains control over inferior binaries across generations, ranging from Sogandhi's domestic confinement to Radha's patronized sexual commodification, exemplifying de Beauvoir's (1949) idea of woman as "*the Other*."

The current research underpins distinct narrative techniques that both writers exploit to their advantage. Manto, on the one hand, employs ironic narration to expose societal hypocrisy, while Sabyn Javeri utilizes psychological contemplation to simultaneously reveal the cognitive workings of Radha to underscore trauma and to advocate her resistance against male agency. The synchronization of both these techniques recommends the employment of Butler's (1990) performativity theory by revealing how patriarchal norms are upheld and defied at the same time.

As a conclusion, the present research highlights the stories as literary tools that expose patriarchy's clever way of camouflage while defying the principal distorted and partial depiction of female experiences. The findings reveal the significance of feminist analyses undertaken from a comparative perspective to trace the adamancy and adaptive nature in gender-based oppression, thus allowing the researchers a framework to further investigate the matter of agency within restricted circumferences in South Asian literature. The study concludes that the expression of oppression may differ, but the basic patriarchal frameworks of authority maintain continuity across ages, necessitating persistent feminist analysis across diversified spatial and temporal settings.

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