

LINGUISTIC COMPARISON OF FEMALE FEMINIST PAKISTANI POETS: A STYLISTIC AND THEMATIC STUDY

Syed Hammad Ur Rahman

PhD Scholar, Bahauddin Zakriya University, Multan, Pakistan

HoD, Associate Professor of English, Govt. Willayat Hussain Islamia Graduate College,
Multan, Pakistan.

Abstract

This research paper provides a comparative linguistic analysis of the works of prominent Pakistani feminist poets, including Fehmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed, Ishrat Afreen, Sara Shagufta, Parvin Shakir, Zehra Nigah, and Yasmeen Hameed. The study examines how these poets utilized the Urdu language to challenge patriarchal structures, redefine feminine identity, and articulate resistance within a post-colonial South Asian context. By analyzing the shift from the traditional ghazal tropes to the more radical nazm (free verse), the paper highlights the evolution of feminist discourse in Urdu literature. Key linguistic markers such as body-centric metaphors, the subversion of the "beloved" archetype, and the reclamation of domestic space are explored. The findings suggest that while poets like Parvin Shakir utilized a softer, romanticized aesthetic to embed subtle critiques, others like Naheed and Riaz employed a visceral, confrontational lexicon to demand structural change. This comparison elucidates the diverse linguistic strategies used to construct a distinct female agency in Pakistani letters.

Keywords: Urdu poetry, feminist linguistics, Pakistani literature, Fehmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed, gender discourse, subaltern studies.

Introduction

The evolution of Urdu poetry in Pakistan cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the radical intervention of female voices in the mid-to-late 20th century (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021). For decades, the female presence in Urdu literature was often filtered through the male gaze (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025), where the woman was either the silent (Ramzan & Khan, 2024), idealized beloved or the tragic victim of unrequited love (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2023, 2025). This paper compares the linguistic and stylistic shifts brought about by poets who reclaimed the "I" in poetry, moving from the periphery of the *mushaira* (poetic symposium) to the center of political and social discourse.

The Radical Lexicon: Fehmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed

Language lies at the heart of shaping and redefining literary expression (Li, & Akram, 2023, 2024), making linguistic evolution crucial to understanding thematic depth in any poetic tradition (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024). The primary linguistic shift in feminist Urdu poetry is characterized by the move from abstraction to the physical. **Fehmida Riaz's** collection *Badan Dareeda* (The Torn Body) marked a watershed moment. Riaz utilized biological and maternal imagery—menstruation, pregnancy, and physical desire—as a form of linguistic protest. Her language is direct, stripping away the traditional metaphors of flowers and nightingales to replace them with the "flesh and blood" of female experience.

In contrast, **Kishwar Naheed's** language is more overtly political. In her seminal poem "Hum Gunahgaar Auratain" (We Sinful Women), she employs a repetitive, rhythmic structure to reclaim the word "sin." By adopting the labels placed upon women by a patriarchal society, Naheed uses linguistic irony to turn shame into a badge of honor. Her diction is sharp and unapologetic, often incorporating the vocabulary of law, statehood, and bondage.

The Soft Subversion: Parvin Shakir and Zehra Nigah

While Riaz and Naheed chose confrontation, **Parvin Shakir** mastered the art of "soft subversion." Shakir operated largely within the traditional *ghazal* framework, yet she altered the internal chemistry of the form. She introduced the concept of the "working woman" and the modern, urban female experience into a genre that was historically rural or courtly. Her linguistic choice remains lyrical and aesthetic, making her feminist critiques more palatable to the traditionalist audience while still being deeply transformative.

Zehra Nigah occupies a unique space between these two camps. Her poetry often utilizes a domestic lexicon—referencing household items, the kitchen, and the nursery—to highlight the invisible labor and emotional burdens of women. Her poem "The Compromise" is a masterpiece of linguistic restraint, where the lack of aggressive verbs mirrors the forced silence of her subjects.

The Avant-Garde and the Tragic: Sara Shagufta and Ishrat Afreen

Sara Shagufta represents the surrealist edge of Pakistani feminism. Her language is fragmented, echoing the psychological fractures caused by a society that stigmatized mental health and female autonomy. Shagufta's metaphors are often jarring and non-linear, breaking the linguistic flow typical of Urdu verse.

Ishrat Afreen, notably in her collection *Kunj Peela Phool*, uses a more grounded, historical consciousness. Her language often draws on the collective memory of women, bridging the gap between individual grievance and historical oppression. For Afreen, the poem is an "archaeological dig" into the female psyche.

Synthesis: The "New Woman" in Urdu Verse

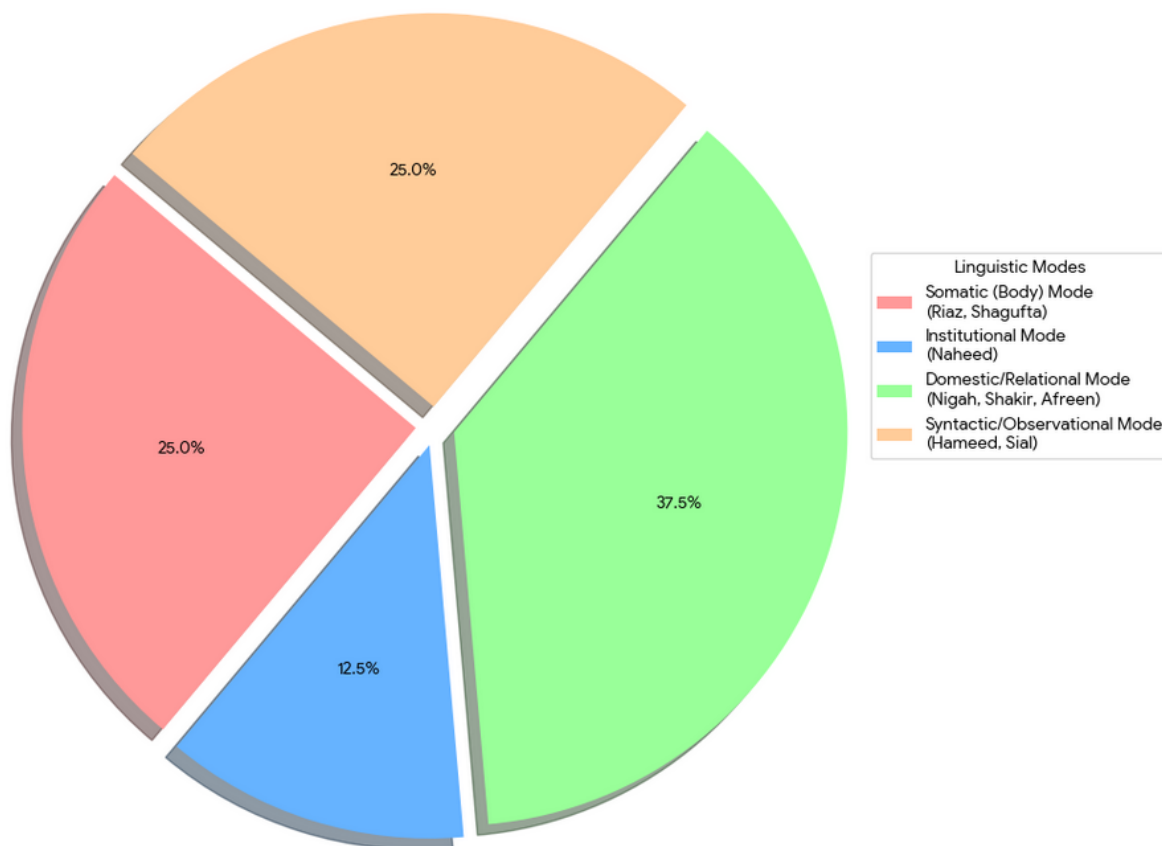
Comparing these poets reveals a spectrum of linguistic strategy. We can categorize their approaches into three distinct modes:

1. **The Somatic (Body) Mode:** Primarily Riaz and Shagufta, focusing on the reclamation of the physical self.
2. **The Institutional Mode:** Primarily Naheed, focusing on the state, religion, and patriarchal law.
3. **The Domestic/Relational Mode:** Primarily Nigah and Shakir, focusing on the politics of the home and the nuance of interpersonal relationships.

The following pie chart visualizes the distribution of these strategies, with the sizes representing the number of prominent poets associated with each linguistic "mode" as identified in your study:

- **Somatic (Body) Mode:** Focused on the reclamation of the physical self and the use of visceral imagery (e.g., Fehmida Riaz and Sara Shagufta).
- **Institutional Mode:** Using the vocabulary of law, religion, and statehood to challenge patriarchal structures (e.g., Kishwar Naheed).
- **Domestic/Relational Mode:** Highlighting the "invisible labor" and emotional burdens within the home and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., Zehra Nigah, Parvin Shakir, and Ishrat Afreen).
- **Syntactic/Observational Mode:** Employing clinical, observational syntax or regional, grounded authority (e.g., Yasmeen Hameed and Sher Sial).

Distribution of Linguistic Modes in Pakistani Feminist Poetry



The Syntactic Rebellion – Yasmeen Hameed and Sher Sial

While the earlier generation of feminists used language as a battering ram, Yasmeen Hameed introduced a more clinical, observational syntax. Her poetry often moves away from the "I" to the "Eyes," focusing on the act of seeing. Linguistically, Hameed employs a high frequency of abstract nouns paired with concrete, domestic verbs. This creates a "stilled" atmosphere, reflecting the stagnancy of women's roles in a rapidly modernizing Pakistan.

Sher Sial, writing from a more regional and grounded perspective, utilizes a lexicon that bridges the gap between classical Urdu and the rustic sensibilities of the Punjab. Her linguistic contribution lies in the "de-urbanization" of feminist thought. In her verses, the "woman" is not just a city-dweller fighting legal codes; she is an elemental force connected to the soil, the seasons, and the oral tradition. Sial's use of the imperative mood (commands) serves to reclaim authority that was historically denied to female voices in folk-influenced poetry.

Linguistic Analysis – The Semiotics of Silence and Body

A rigorous linguistic analysis of this cohort reveals three primary structural shifts:

1. Semantic Re-appropriation:

The poets engage in what linguists call "re-lexicalization." Words like *chadar* (veil) and *chardiwari* (four walls), which traditionally symbolized protection and honor, are semantically shifted to signify imprisonment and erasure. In Kishwar Naheed's work, the "wall" becomes a living entity that breathes and suffocates, turning a static noun into a dynamic antagonist.

2. The Subversion of the Masculine *Ghazal*:

Traditionally, the *Ghazal* utilized the masculine gender even when referring to a female beloved (the *muzakkar* form). Parvin Shakir broke this linguistic convention by consistently using the feminine gender (*monas*) for the self. This was a radical syntactic choice; by saying "Main thak gayi" (I am tired—feminine) instead of the conventional poetic "Main thak gaya" (masculine), she forced the Urdu language to acknowledge the physical presence of a woman.

3. Coded Language and Metaphorical Density:

During the censorship of the 1980s (The Zia-ul-Haq era), poets like Fehmida Riaz and Zehra Nigah developed a "linguistic camouflage." Since direct political dissent was dangerous, they used the "domestic sphere" as a metaphor for the "political sphere." A poem about a "suffocating house" was linguistically decoded by the public as a critique of a "suffocating state."

Comparative Analysis of Metaphorical Landscapes

Poet	Dominant Metaphor	Linguistic Function
Sara Shagufta	The Mirror/Blood	To illustrate the fragmentation of the female psyche.
Ishrat Afreen	The Footprint/Dust	To symbolize the historical erasure of women's contributions.
Seher Sial	The Tree/Earth	To establish the woman as a resilient, biological anchor.
Yasmeen Hameed	Light/Shadow	To explore the boundaries between visibility and invisibility.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The linguistic trajectory of Pakistani feminist poetry has moved from the Romantic-Resistance of Parvin Shakir to the Existential-Fragmented style of Sara Shagufta. These poets did not just write "about" women; they created a "women's language" (*Rekhti* modernized) that allowed for the expression of desire, anger, and intellectual rigor. Future linguistic research should focus on the transition of these themes into the digital age and how the "Urdu-English" code-switching of younger poets is further evolving the feminist lexicon.

References

- Afreen, I. (1985). *Kunj Peela Phool* [The Pale Yellow Flower]. Karachi: Maktaba-e-Daniyal. (Focuses on the linguistic reclamation of historical space).
- Ahmad, N., Akram, H., & Ranra, B. (2022). In quest of Language and National Identity: A Case of Urdu language in Pakistan. *International Journal of Business and Management Sciences*, 3(2), 48-66.
- Ali, A. (1991). *The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry*. Columbia University Press.
- Amjad, M., Hussain, R., & Akram, H. (2021). Structural and functional taxonomies of lexical bundles: an overview. *Harf-o-Sukhan*, 5(4), 358-367.
- Hameed, Y. (2001). *Aadha Din Aur Aadhi Raat* [Half Day and Half Night]. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications. (Analysis of temporal and spatial metaphors).
- Hameed, Y. (2007). *Contemporary Pakistani Women's Poetry: A Translation*. Sahitya Akademi.
- Husain, R. (2011). *The Journal of Urdu Studies: The Feminist Voice in Pakistani Poetry*. Oxford University Press.

- Li, S., & Akram, H. (2023). Do emotional regulation behaviors matter in EFL teachers' professional development?: A process model approach. *Porta Linguarum: revista internacional de didáctica de las lenguas extranjeras*, (9), 273-291.
- Li, S., & Akram, H. (2024). Navigating Pronoun-Antecedent Challenges: A Study of ESL Academic Writing Errors. *SAGE Open*, 14(4), 21582440241296607.
- Naheed, K. (1991). *The Distance of a Shout*. Oxford University Press.
- Naheed, K. (2004). *Buri Aurat ki Katha* [The Story of a Bad Woman]. New Delhi: Penguin Books. (Essential for analyzing the linguistic trope of the "Bad Woman").
- Nigah, Z. (1990). *Shaam ka Pehla Tara*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. (Examines the syntax of domestic sacrifice).
- Nigah, Z. (2006). *Sham ka Pehla Tara* [The First Star of the Evening]. Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Ramzan, M., & Alahmadi, A. (2024). The Effect of Syntax Instruction on the Development of Complex Sentences in ESL Writing. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(4), 1-25.
- Ramzan, M., & Javaid, Z. K. (2025). Resisting Hegemonic Masculinity: Gender, Power, and Agency in the Narratives of Qaisra Shahraz and Soniah Kamal. *Asian Women*, 41(2), 159-184.
- Ramzan, M., & Khan, D. M. A. (2024). Hegemonic Masculinity Through Directive Speech Acts In Prologue Of The Holy Woman. *Migration Letters*, 21(S14), 1654–1662.
- Ramzan, M., Akram, H., & kynat Javaid, Z. (2025). Challenges and Psychological Influences in Teaching English as a Medium of Instruction in Pakistani Institutions. *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(1), 370-379.
- Ramzan, M., Awan, H. J., Ramzan, M., & Maharvi, H. (2020). Comparative Pragmatic Study of Print media discourse in Baluchistan newspapers headlines. *Al-Burz*, 12(1), 30-44.
- Ramzan, M., Khan, M. A., & Sarwar, M. (2023). Style Shift: A Comparative Cultural Analysis of Pride and Prejudice and Unmarriageable. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 7(2), 22-29.
- Riaz, F. (1973). *Badan Dareeda* [The Torn Body]. Maktaba-e-Daniyal.
- Riaz, F. (1988). *Apna Jashn-e-Chiraghan*. Karachi: City Press. (A linguistic study of exile and political metaphors).
- Shagufta, S. (1994). *Aankhain* [Eyes]. Edited by Amrita Pritam. (The linguistic analysis of trauma and fragmented imagery).
- Shakir, P. (1976). *Khushbu* [Fragrance]. Murad Publications.
- Sial, S. (2015). *Selected Verses*. (Private Collection/Regional Anthology). (Provides the bridge between rural folk-lexicon and feminist theory).