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Stylistic Analysis of Kishwar Naheed's Poem "I Am Not That Woman"

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Abstract

The present study analyzes the stylistic features of the poem "I Am Not That Woman" written by Kishwar Naheed. The content analysis approach was used to examine how Kishwar Naheed uses poetic devices to challenge gender norms and reclaim the voice of the female. This article aims to explore the main attached to the poem. This study reveals that stylistic features such as metaphor, irony, personification, and parallelism serve as crucial tools in expressing hidden meanings fixed to each word and sentence of the poem. This article examines all the aspects in the text that reveal the complete picture of the poem. This study will help to comprehend the basic themes of the poem, such as themes of resistance, identity, and gender oppression.

Key Words: Feminism, Stylistic Analysis. Kishwar Naheed, Pakistani Poetry

Background

Style and Stylistics

The word "stylistics" is derived from the word "style". Style is how the writer uses language through their word choice, sentence structure, and literary devices to express their thoughts. Style differs from one writer to another, and even the same writer's style can be different across his/her different pieces of writing. Pretorius and Swart (1982) define style as "a way in which a writer utilizes the linguistic means at his disposal to produce a definite effect on the reader" (p. 20). Stylistics is a dynamic field that bridges the gap between linguistics and literary criticism. As Leech and Short (1981) explain, stylistics can resemble either discipline depending on the perspective from which it is approached. They define it as "the linguistic study of style," emphasizing its analytical foundation in language (p. 10). According to Short (1996), stylistics functions in two ways—it investigates both the linguistic form and the thematic content of any given text, whether spoken or written.

Widdowson (1975) similarly views stylistics as "the study of literary discourses from a linguistic orientation" (p. 4), highlighting its dual concern with literary and linguistic elements. He stresses that stylistics not only explores literary meaning but also analyzes linguistic features such as morphology, graphology,



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and syntax. This dual focus allows stylistics to offer both linguistic insights and an objective approach to literary interpretation.

Kumar (1987) supports this view, arguing that theories grounded in language help develop objective methods of analysis. He believes stylistics enables the interpretation of literary texts by concentrating solely on the text itself, rather than the author's background or intentions (p. 40).

Similarly, Verdonk (2002) defines stylistics as a field concerned with identifying and examining distinctive features within both spoken and written discourse (p. 4). Wales (2011) adds that style is a writer's unique way of expressing thoughts, whether in speech or writing (p. 397). Isti'anah (2017) further asserts that stylistics helps readers understand how language creates meaning in literary texts, promoting interpretation based on textual evidence rather than assumptions.

Research Objective

The main objective of the study was to analyze the Kishwar Naheed's poem in stylistic way for the purpose of exploring devices used by her in this poem. To accomplish this purpose the researchers uses the following research question.

Research Question

Stylistically analyze Kishwar Naheed's Poem "I Am Not That Woman."?

About the Poetess

Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940) is one of the most prominent female writers and best-known feminist poets of Pakistan. Kishwar Naheed was born in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, India, but after the partition Indian subcontinent, she migrated to Lahore with her family in 1949. As she was still a child at that time, she witnessed the horrors of partition, particularly the violence against women, which left a deep mark on her. These early experiences later became important themes in her poetry, such as themes of pain, resistance, and struggles faced by the woman. She was raised in a traditional household where girls were not encouraged to pursue higher education. Despite societal restrictions, she completed her studies privately and earned a master's degree in Economics from Punjab University. She has written twelve volumes of poetry, and her works have been translated and published internationally. She has also written eight books for children, and she was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Children's Literature. Her love for children is as strong as her concern for women. She has also received the Sitara-e-Imtiaz (Star of Excellence) award for her literary contributions to Urdu literature. Her concern for women's rights is reflected in her poems like "Asian Burian We Loko" and "I am not Woman", which address the challenges and struggles faced by women in a male-dominated society. Some of her famous poetry collections include Lab-e-Goya, Benaam Musafat, Nazmen, Galian, Dhoop, and Darwaze.

About the Poem

One of the most famous poems by Kishwar Naheed is "I Am Not That Woman." This poem challenges the stereotypical roles that society forces on women. Naheed speaks out and breaks the silence through powerful, honest expression. It questions the way women are treated and perceived in a patriarchal society.



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Kishwar Naheed uses simple but strong language to challenge the traditions that limit the potential of women. She repeats the line “I am not that woman” to make her message clear and powerful, showing that she and other women like her are not weak or silent. This poem is a bold message to society and a call for women to stand up and speak for themselves.

Actual Line of the Poem

*I am not that woman
Selling you socks and shoes!
Remember me, I am the one you hid
In your walls of stone, while you roamed
Free as the breeze, not knowing
That my voice cannot be smothered by stones,
I am the one you crushed
With the weight of custom and tradition
Not knowing
That light cannot be hidden in darkness.
Remember me,
I am the one in whose lap
You picked flowers
And planted thorns and embers
Not knowing
That chains cannot smother my fragrance
I am the woman
Whom you bought and sold
In the name of my own chastity
Not knowing
That I can walk on water
When I am drowning.
I am the one you married off
To get rid of a burden
Not knowing
That a nation of captive minds
Cannot be free.
I am the commodity you traded in,
My chastity, my motherhood, my loyalty.
Now it is time for me to flower free.
The woman on that poster, half-naked, selling socks and shoes-
No, no, I am not that woman!*

Literature Review

One of the most effective ways to explore how language contributes to meaning is through stylistic analysis (Ahmad et al., 2021). Scholars such as Leech and Short (1981) emphasize that stylistic analysis combines linguistic scrutiny with literary interpretation, making it a valuable tool for examining texts that address socially critical and sensitive themes, such as gender and identity. This approach is especially relevant in feminist poetry, where the use of literary language, structure, and tone often functions as a mode of resistance against societal norms.



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Stylistic analysis has been applied to interpret and analyze the works of many feminist poets, including Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, and Audre Lorde, to understand how figurative language articulates their struggles, emotions, and acts of defiance. Similarly, stylistic analysis has been employed in the study of Pakistani feminist literature. In this context, Kishwar Naheed emerges as a powerful voice. Her poetry is deeply embedded in cultural and political realities. It not only challenges gender roles but also interrogates the systemic subjugation of women in South Asia.

Bano and Arshad (2017) examined stylistic features in Urdu feminist poetry to explore how language can serve as a tool for empowerment. They found that intertextual references, irony, repetition, and metaphor are common stylistic choices used by poets to express feminist ideologies. Naheed's poem "I Am Not That Woman" is a compelling example of such use of stylistic features to challenge the constructs of chastity, honor, and silence imposed on women.

In addition, Rahman (2010) asserts that stylistic analysis can uncover the subversive power of literary texts, particularly in regions where criticism of societal norms may be censored. In Naheed's work, the repeated negation "I am not that woman" serves as both a rhetorical and stylistic device that reclaims identity and confronts imposed definitions of womanhood.

Thus, this article draws upon previous work in feminist stylistics to analyze "I Am Not That Woman" not merely as a poem of protest, but as a carefully constructed literary piece in which every image and metaphor functions to dismantle dominant patriarchal ideologies.

Materials and Methodology

This study takes qualitative content analysis through the lens of stylistics to analyze the poem "I Am Not That Woman" by Kishwar Naheed. According to Maitlo et al. (2025), stylistics is a practical methodological tool of inquiry that provides an organized basis for the study of the language and literary devices employed by the poet to express feminist ideas and disrupt patriarchal narratives.

Analysis considered not only all linguistic features but also the literary elements present in the poem (Cheema et al., 2023). Stylistic features provide the basis for the analysis, which includes metaphor, irony, repetition, personification, parallelism, and lexical choices. These features were analyzed to show how the poet has used her text and manipulated language to represent ideas about resistance, identity, gender oppression, and empowerment (Maitlo et al., 2022).

The text of the poem was the primary data source, while secondary sources, such as journal articles, stylistic theory, and feminist literary criticism were included to support the interpretation of the poetic stylistic features. No external interviews, surveys or other empirical data were used as the study was text-based.

Qualitative analysis allows for an immersive analysis and more contextual understanding of the poem, consistent to examine and interrogate how the stylistic features used in "I Am Not That Woman" convey meaning and a feminist message.

Analysis

Graphological Level



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Graphology deals with the visual and orthographic features of a text, such as punctuation, capitalization, line spacing, and layout. In stylistics, graphological features often serve a rhetorical or aesthetic purpose, especially in poetry. Leech and Short (1981) define graphology as the “whole writing system of a language, including punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing” (p. 132).

In “I Am Not That Woman,” Kishwar Naheed uses free verse, which means the poem does not follow a regular rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. This lack of formal structure itself reinforces the poet’s central message—a rejection of constraints, both poetic and societal. The poem is visually fragmented, with line breaks that create pauses and tension, reflecting the speaker’s resistance and emotional struggle.

The most notable graphological feature is the repetition of the line “*I am not that woman*”, which appears at key moments throughout the poem. This line is usually separated by a line break and stands alone, giving it visual and thematic emphasis. This structural choice draws the reader’s eye and underlines the speaker’s refusal to be defined by traditional expectations.

The minimal use of punctuation also contributes to the poem’s flow and urgency. The absence of full stops creates a continuous, breathless rhythm, mirroring the speaker’s determination to speak without interruption. This technique reflects what Wales (2014) identifies as a common stylistic trait in free verse poetry, where “punctuation is often deliberately avoided to create open-endedness or rapidity in voice” (p. 189).

In this way, Naheed’s graphological choices work hand in hand with her message. The visual structure of the poem mirrors the emotional and ideological rejection of patriarchal boundaries. Her refusal to conform to poetic norms reflects her refusal to conform to gendered expectations.

Phonological Level

Phonology in stylistics refers to the sound patterns and devices used in a text, such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. These elements enhance the musicality, emotional effect, and emphasis in poetry. As Leech (1969) suggests, phonological choices often serve to reinforce meaning and create a specific mood or tone within a literary work.

Although “I Am Not That Woman” is written in free verse and does not follow a traditional rhyme scheme, Kishwar Naheed uses several sound devices to emphasize her message. Repetition is the most prominent phonological feature in the poem. The recurring line “*I am not that woman*” acts as a refrain, creating a rhythmic pattern that not only gives the poem structure but also strengthens its defiant tone. This repeated phrase echoes like a chant, leaving a lasting impact on the reader and mirroring the speaker’s resistance to societal expectations.

Naheed also uses internal rhyme and parallel sound structures in phrases like “*displayed, exploited*” and “*buy and sell*”, where the pairing of similar-sounding words adds a musical quality and emphasizes key themes of objectification and commodification.

While the poem does not rely heavily on formal phonological devices like alliteration or assonance, the oral quality of the poem—its chant-like rhythm and flowing cadence—reflects the urgency and emotional strength of the speaker’s voice. This aligns with Widdowson’s (1975) view that in poetry, rhythm and sound help convey the speaker’s attitude and emotional state.



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In this way, the phonological features of the poem support its central message. The rhythmic repetition and paired sounds enhance the forceful rejection of patriarchal roles and amplify the poem's bold and confrontational tone.

Morphological Level

Morphology is the study of word formation, including prefixes, suffixes, and root words. It looks at how words are built and how their structure can affect meaning. In this poem, Naheed uses simple yet impactful word forms, which reflect both clarity and strength.

Words like “*exploited*,” “*displayed*,” “*veiled*,” “*betrayed*,” and “*abandoned*” are rich in meaning. They are often past participles, showing actions done to the speaker, which highlights the passive roles society imposes on women. Yet the speaker flips that passivity by actively rejecting it through the repeated phrase “I am not that woman.”

These word choices carry heavy emotional and political weight, and their morphology (use of -ed suffix) links them to historical oppression, giving the poem a sense of lived experience and past struggle.

Syntactic Level

Syntax refers to sentence structure and word order. In “I Am Not That Woman,” the syntax is deliberately fragmented and simple, often avoiding full sentences. This broken structure mirrors the broken identities and interrupted lives of women under patriarchy.

Naheed uses parallel structures like “*who is always sold... / who is always bought...*” to emphasize repetition in how women are treated. These syntactic patterns create rhythm and highlight oppression as a repetitive cycle.

The poem also uses direct statements and avoids complex sentence structures, which strengthens its confrontational tone. The voice is active, assertive, and emotionally charged.

Lexical Level

Lexical analysis focuses on word choice. Naheed's diction in this poem is both plain and powerful. She selects everyday words—such as *veil*, *door*, *shop window*, *sold*, *bought*, *betrayed*—but uses them in strong, symbolic ways.

This accessible vocabulary allows a wider audience to engage with the poem's message, while still conveying complex ideas about objectification, silence, and rebellion. The poem's repetitive vocabulary reinforces its themes: control, commodification, and resistance.

Semantic Level

Semantics is concerned with meaning. On the surface, the poem appears simple, but its symbolism and metaphors add layers of meaning.

- The *veil* represents silencing and invisibility.
- The *shop window* symbolizes the objectification and commodification of women.
- The *man who takes her body and claims her soul* points to the physical and psychological control imposed on women.

Figurative Devices



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Kishwar Naheed uses several literary and rhetorical devices to enhance the emotional and political impact of the poem:

Figurative Device	Line (s) from the Poem	Function/Interpretation
Metaphor	“My voice cannot be smothered by stones.”	Represents the speaker’s unbreakable will and defiance, even when silenced.
Irony	“Whom you bought and sold / In the name of my chastity”	Criticizes the misuse of honor to justify female oppression.
Repetition	“I am not that woman” (repeated throughout)	Reinforces rejection of stereotypes and asserts personal identity.
Personification	“Chains cannot smother my fragrance.”	Gives human qualities to chains and fragrance, symbolizing inner freedom and spirit.
Parallelism	“You picked flowers / And planted thorns and embers”	Contrasts innocence with betrayal to intensify the emotional impact.
Symbolism	“Walk on water / When I am drowning”	Signifies female resilience in the face of overwhelming oppression.

Conclusion

Kishwar Naheed’s “I Am Not That Woman” stands as a powerful feminist text that uses stylistic elements to challenge traditional gender roles and cultural expectations. Through the use of free verse, strong imagery, repetition, and metaphor, Naheed constructs a voice that is bold, assertive, and unafraid to resist oppression.

The poem is not only a personal declaration but also a collective cry for liberation from silence and objectification. The stylistic analysis demonstrates that every linguistic choice made by the poet, whether in sound, form, or word, serves to support the message of resistance and empowerment. This study affirms that stylistics offers a valuable approach to understanding the deeper layers of meaning in feminist poetry and provides a lens to appreciate how language can be used as a tool of protest and self-assertion.

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