

WRITING AS A METAPHOR FOR SURVIVAL: LOOKING AT
PAKISTANI WOMEN WRITERS' SHORT STORIES
THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECRITURE FEMININE

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ISSN 2277-7733
Volume 13 Issue 1,
June 2024

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Abstract

This research paper explores the representation of "Ecriture Feminine" in Rakhsbanda Jalil's "Neither Night nor Day". Ecriture feminine is a French feminist theorist movement which means "Feminist writing". This concept attempts to challenge the patriarchal language and structures that are prevalent in society. This paper also delves into the origin, historical context, and literary background of Ecriture feminine. While also throwing light upon the famous philosophers who are also considered the "mothers of post-structuralist feminist theory", namely, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Through the detailed analysis of the thirteen stories provided in this book and by exploring its major female characters, one can acquire a nuanced understanding of how Jalil employs ecriture feminine to articulate women's identity, experiences, and resistances within a postcolonial context.

Keywords: *karo -kari tradition, rape, abduction, ecriture feminine, female oppression, partition.*

Ecriture Feminine is a term originally coined by Helene Cixous in her famous essay "The Laugh of Medusa" written in 1975. This term is associated with feminism. Helene Cixous is a philosopher, French writer, and playwright born in 1937. Earlier, the women writers considered language as male-oriented and they wished to have a form of language that was free from biases or in some way oriented towards females. Therefore, Cixous propounded the existence of ecriture feminine. This is a form of writing that allowed women to express themselves freely. In psychoanalysis, ecriture feminine throws light upon the ways or methods through which humans can comprehend their social roles. It explains how women may be positioned as 'other' in a masculine symbolic order. It emphasises how women reaffirm their understanding of the world by engaging with their own otherness, both within and outside their own minds, or consciousness. Commenting upon the source of ecriture feminine, Helene Cixous says that it has its source in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. Helene Cixous says, "Ecriture Feminine places experience before language, and privileges non-linear, cyclical writing that evades "the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system".

This concept refers to a unique way of feminine writing that is characterized by breaks, pauses, or gaps in the text and also the use of strange images.

Emily Dickinson's poetry is a perfect example that beautifully displays the use of *écriture féminine*. Other French writers have also commented on the concept of *écriture féminine*, for example, Luce Irigaray is a Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalyst, and cultural theorist. She examined the uses and misuses of the language about women. According to Irigaray, women's writing draws upon the diversity, fluidity, and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and the functions of female sexual experiences. The second example is of Julia Kristeva, who is a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, semiotician, psychoanalyst, and feminist writer. According to her, *écriture féminine* behaves like the semiotic, disrupts the symbolic, and threatens to unleash chaos where there is order. While masculine language represents the symbolic. i.e. it is linear, authoritative, and realistic. There are some other works of contemporary writers such as Helene Cixous herself, and others like Marguerite Duras and Monique Wittig, that provide rich exemplification of how feminine writing can challenge and subvert traditional literary forms. These authors often use fragmented narratives, poetic language and an emphasis on the sensational and emotional experiences of their characters, creating texts that resonate with the rules and regulations of *écriture féminine*.

The writers in this anthology are mostly females and they belong to Pakistan. For example, Bina Shah is a significant Pakistani writer, journalist, and also a feminist. Her works often attempt to explore the issues faced by women and it also provides a nuanced understanding of the South Asian culture. Soniah Kamal is a Pakistani–American writer whose full name is Soniah Naheed Kamal. Kamal's career peaked after her thesis "On Prince Charmings", "Frogs", and "Love Marriages and Arranged Ones" was awarded the 1996 Susan Irene Roberts Prize. After this, she gained a lot of popularity and her works were published in Pakistan, Canada, India, and the US. Nikhat Hasan is also one of the prominent Pakistani writers who was born in Buland Shehr, U.P. The beginning of her career was marked at the start of the year 1960. She lives in Karachi. Hasan translated the story, "The Tongue" from Urdu by Baidar Bakht and Kathleen Grant Jaeger. Nayyara Rahman is a Pakistani poet, writer, and business student in Karachi. "Clay Fissures" is one of the famous work of Nayyara Rahman which was among one of the five winning entries in a national competition organized by the British Council, Pakistan.

Sorayya Khan is also a well-known Pakistani writer. She is also the author of "Noor" (2003) and the forthcoming "Five Queen's Road". Sorayya Khan has also won prestigious awards like the Fulbright Award and the Malahat Review Novella Prize. Muneza Shamsie holds an important position in the field and Pakistani literature and she is also regarded in the list of the prominent writers in Pakistan. She was born in Lahore and she got her education from England. She is also writing a book on Pakistani Literature. Maniza Naqvi is a writer from Pakistan who was born in the year 1960. She

is the author of three novels, “Mass Transit”, “On Air”, and “Stay with Me”. She is working on her fourth novel. Khaleda Hussain is also one of the important writers of Pakistan. She began writing fiction in 1963 under her maiden name. Sehba Sarwar grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, and has published essays, short stories, and poems in magazines in Pakistan, India, the US, and Canada. She has also received a graduation degree in public affairs.

Rakhshanda Jalil is an Indian writer, critic, multi-award-winning translator and also a literary historian. She was born on 20th July 1963. In 1986, she graduated from Miranda House, Delhi University. Jalil’s doctoral thesis on the Progressive Writers’ Movement, as reflected in Urdu literature, was published by Oxford University Press under the title “Liking Progress, Loving Change” in 2014. This publication is considered useful in providing critical insights into the methods by which the Progressive Writers’ Movement shaped the Urdu literature and its socio-political discourse. She was born into a family with profound appreciation of literature and arts, which greatly influenced her academic trajectory. Due to the literary environment in which she was raised, she was constantly exposed to the works of classical and contemporary Urdu writers, instilling in her a lifelong passion for the language and its literary traditions. Jalil runs an organization named Hindustani Awaaz, which is dedicated to the popularization of Hindi-Urdu literature and culture. She began her career as a lecturer in the Khalsa College. Later in her life, she taught English at the universities of Delhi and Aligarh. Beyond her academic accomplishments, Jalil has made significant contributions as a writer and translator, she has published over 25 books and written over 50 academic papers and essays. She has also translated a collection of Premchand’s short stories titled as “The Temple and the Mosque”. She translated a collection of satirical writings in Hindi by Asghar Wajahat. One of her famous works include, “Invisible City: The hidden monuments of Delhi”, which attempts to throw light into the lesser-known historical and cultural landmarks of Delhi. Jalil’s work in the realm of Feminist Literature is also marked by her commitment to exploring the intersections of culture, gender, and power. One of her significant contributions to feminist literature is her anthology, “Neither Night nor Day”, which presents 13 stories by different Pakistani women writers and was also shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2008. In many interviews and articles, Jalil describes that in this book her main concern or goal was to present a complete picture of the everydayness of life as it is lived and experienced by Pakistani women. Almost all the writers chosen here by Jalil live in Pakistan and others who live or work abroad have maintained close links with their country. By making use of this approach, Jalil is not only successful in showcasing the talents of Pakistani writers but also contributes to a nuanced understanding of their social and cultural milieu. A book such as this, will eventually meet and requirements and interests of a wide variety of readers, for example, individuals engaged in

women's studies in South Asia literature, as well as people from the South Asian diaspora who look upon the literature from this part of the world as a part of their cultural heritage but use English as their effective first language. Violence in the Name of Tradition and its Impact on Women Bina Shah's 'The Wedding of Sundri': 'The Wedding of Sundri' is a work by Bina Shah that successfully captures the social and cultural elements of a traditional South Asian society. This is an enthralling short story that explores the theme of gender, autonomy, tradition and the representation of female bodies as a symbol of tradition through the lens of *Écriture féminine*. The protagonist or the major female character in the story is Sundri, a young Pakistani girl of 12 years who is married to Ghulam Farid, who was a 23-year-old man working as a sharecropper in the nearby Zamindar's fields. This story presents a picture before the readers of how a woman is miserably caught between the expectations of her conservative society and her wishes and desires. The perfect example of female solidarity and complicity is the character of Sebhagi, the mother of Sundri because the interactions between Sundri and Sebhagi reflect the dual nature of her mother. Her mother on the one hand, is acting as the enforcer of tradition and on the other hand she is also sympathetic towards her daughter. "Allah have mercy, Allah have mercy, Sebhagi said under her breath." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:141). Here, the readers can sense that Sebhagi is scared for her daughter Sundri and seeks mercy from the Almighty.

Unfortunately, Sundri is killed on the very next day of her marriage and she is declared a Kari. There is a tradition in Pakistan which is locally known as the 'karo-kari tradition', which refers to honor killings of females which are believed to bring dishonor to the family's reputation, and the death of the victim is viewed as a method to restore the reputation and honor of the family. According to research, around 1000 women are murdered every year in the name of honor killing. The protagonist was believed to bring dishonour to family because she used to play with the boys in the village and she laughed freely. "It was one of the women in your village. She was here for the wedding. She spoke to my uncle. She said that the girl used to play with the boys in the village. The girl was shameless, the woman said. She would laugh in front of them and walk in front of them and make them go mad with lust for her". (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007: 151).

These lines from the book highlight the female oppression and patriarchy in society and how a female is only depicted as a symbol of tradition and nothing beyond it. The restrictions imposed on Sundri by society and her arranged marriage are also symbolic of the broader societal expectations placed on females to restrict themselves to their predetermined roles.

Soniah Kamal's 'The Breast': While examining the major themes of this story through the lens of *Écriture féminine*, this story attempts to explore the complicated emotions revolving around womanhood, motherhood, and the female body. One of the major themes of this story is embodiment and

physicality, highlighting one of the major principles of *Ecriture Feminine* which includes the importance of body in women's writing. "The breast is a gigantic wad of fat. Getting rid of one, seven. Seven pounds of shapeless fat sliced off painlessly, while I lie on a table surrounded by people who care for me, who have been paid to care for me". (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:69). These lines highlight the protagonist's deep relationship with her body and also reflect the physical experience of the protagonist which also focuses on the breast as a symbol of femininity and sexuality. This story by Kamal perfectly aligns with Cixous's call for women to write through their bodies, challenging the silence imposed on them by this patriarchal society. At the end of the story, one of the breasts of the protagonist is butchered in the name of punishment. The main theme of this story is female infanticide, a practice that is deeply rooted in our country. This highlights how the people in society prefer a male child over a female child. This theme highlights the deep-rooted system which devalues the female sex since birth or even before that. "I have seen the pleasure when a boy is announced, and I have seen the disappointment and pain, although they try to hide it when a mother hands over the baby girl and says, as the custom goes- Take her, bury her". (Neither Night nor Day, 2007:70). Kamal uses simple language in her works, though the issue that she tackles are very complex. This story is an act of resistance and a medium of awareness about gender-based violence and challenges. This story also emphasizes the role of literature and arts in advocating for social change.

Sehba Sarwar's 'A Sandstone Past': This story by Sarwar has a gothic element in it. The story revolves around three female young characters i.e. Huma, her sister, and her sister's best friend Rovina. They went to a birthday party in Safia Leghari's house who is in Huma's class. And there they came to know about the ghost and about the past of that house.

While taking permission from their mother, the readers become aware of the rules that are imposed on females by the society itself. "No one should be out that late, especially not young girls like you. She clicked her tongue again." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007: 125). Here, one can say that in the conditioning of the female gender, the guardians are very careful and the females are made aware that they are not safe. Later, in the story, readers came to know about the love story of Uncle Farid and Sarita. It was an inter-religious marriage, as Uncle Farid was Muslim and Sarita was a Hindu woman. Some people say that the older brother of Uncle Farid had planned the murder of Sarita because he knew about this marriage and he was against it. "It's said that the spirit of Sarita still roams in this house searching for her uncle. He's old, you know, and lives in London. I've seen him only once." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:131).

Here, the readers can easily differentiate between the treatment given to two different genders i.e. male and female. Both Uncle Farid and Sarita wanted to get married but the repercussions of this marriage were only faced by the

female character i.e. Sarita. The patriarchal structures always try to dominate the women in these situations because they consider them weak. In this narrative, there is this unique technique that a character present in this story narrates another story. This technique is called frame narrative or sandwich narrative. So here, storytelling becomes a crucial tool for empowerment in *écriture féminine*. This narrative becomes a means of healing, self-discovery, and challenging the past that has shaped the past of the female character Sarita.

Targeted Suffering: The Plight of Women During the Partition of 1947 and Ghadar of 1857 Sorayya Khan's "Five queen's Street": This story revolves around the horrors of partition in the year 1947. It highlights the incident of abducting a Hindu women named Janoo, the wife of Dina Lal. This highlights the suffering of the females during difficult times. "Like you? Javaid inquired. Muslims. They've come to take Hindu girls away, idiot!" (*Neither Night Nor Day*, 2007:82). In this narrative, both the struggles of the character Janoo and the resilient spirit of Rubina are highlighted. The wishes, actions, and interactions of Rubina with other characters reflect her resistance against the limitations imposed on the females by the society which perfectly resonates with the concept of *Ecriture féminine*, as it celebrates such acts of defiance and the expression of female subjectivity. On the contrary, the actions of Javaid in the story reflect the patriarchal norms that *Ecriture féminine* critiques. His words often reflected the expectations of the society that saw women as a vessel for tradition, but his eyes betrayed a longing for change. While examining the narrative style, one can see that Sorayya Khan has employed a lyrical and evocative prose style which helps to convey the emotional depths and complexity of the character's experience. This story is structured in a method that intertwines personal anecdotes with historical events. This multi-layered technique provides a rich, textured understanding of how society makes women their target even in such crucial times.

Muneeza Shamsie's "That Heathen Air": This story highlights the cruelties of British rule on the people of India and particularly on women. It tells how women are targeted in times of war. It highlights the greatest war of the 19th century, i.e. the Ghadar of 1857. As the historians say that this war covered more than 20 cities, which were considered the major centres of production in the colonial India. Muneeza Shamsie wants the readers to pay attention to the atrocities of British. As this story unfolds, the protagonist, namely, Princess Gohar Taj tells that the Britishers had murdered the men of her family brutally and also raped the women. "They had raped the women too, or given them to their Indian allies as slaves or booty". (*Neither Night Nor Day*, 2007: 177). This story also highlights the treatment which is given to Princess Gohar Taj by her husband and how he does not validate her emotions and feelings. He rather looks down upon her when she cries due the separation of her young children who are being sent to England for

studies at a very young age. “No Englishwomen, he believed, would disgrace herself with such a vulgar display of emotion.” (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:183). Here, he fails to understand the motherly affection of a woman which is the most beautiful part of being a female and he even thinks that it is a disgrace to behave like this. He even compares his wife to the Englishwomen whom he considers to be superior. Though the emotions of the protagonist are ignored highlighting the themes of power and gender dynamics. This narrative reflects the struggle and strengths of females within their social and cultural context, while also uncovering the layers of meaning related to women’s struggle, resistance, and identities. The title of this story is itself symbolic of the protagonist’s perceived otherness and exoticization of her identity. The term “heathen” as used by Shamsie underscores the religious and cultural tensions that evade the story, throwing light on the protagonist’s struggle for acceptance. Shamsie’s prose is also evocative and rich in imagery, showcasing the nuances of the protagonist’s internal world and the external environment.

‘Marriage’ and ‘Home’: Barriers and transformations in Women’s life
Nayyara Rahman’s ‘The Job Application’: This story revolves around the protagonist of the story, Farzana Ansari, and her struggle to get a job at Z.L. and Company. It reflects the imbalance between her personal and professional identity, exploring how societal norms impact the female identity. “She is a widow, Safdar Sahab. You know how difficult things are for such women. Especially in our society.” (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:116). Shermain Khan, the manager of the company, speaks these lines. These lines tell us that Shermain herself being a woman is not able to understand how much this job had in Farzana Ansari’s life. She has a stereotypical mindset due to which she imposes prejudices that seek to limit her potential. “When you’re a widow living alone with your five-year-old, there are lots of arrangements to make.” (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:103). The protagonist of the story is herself aware of her duties of motherhood and she is bold enough to fulfil them and also have a balanced professional life. Here, she embodies the themes of power, identity, and resistance. She also sets an example that a female also has the intellectual capabilities to enter in the corporate world if she wants to and she is not inferior in any way. Overall, this story by Rahman is a beautiful exploration of power dynamics, female identity, and resistance within a patriarchal structure. The journey of Farzana Ansari highlights the broader feminist themes, celebrating women’s resilience and agency in the face of systematic challenges.

Khaleda Hussain’s ‘Leaves’: This story by Hussain is translated from the Urdu by Baran Rehman. The prominent female character in this story is Rahela and as the story unfolds the readers are made aware of the encounters of Rahela with her school friends, namely, Malik and Syed Ameer Ali. Beside this, the title of this story resonates with the themes of it. The natural setting and its descriptions can be symbolic of the internal

thoughts of the female protagonist. This perfectly aligns with the principle of *écriture féminine* that often uses nature as a metaphor for women's experiences. There is a sense of insecurity in Rahela and also she is not confident enough about herself while having a conversation with Malik. Here, the writer has used a slightly different technique by highlighting the lines in italic to divert the attention of the readers into the psychic of this character.

"Unaccomplished, you never did accomplish anything." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007: 42). This narrative portrays a nuanced understanding of the themes such as female identity, isolation, and complexities a women faces while navigating through a patriarchal world.

Revolutionary Narratives: Women's Voices Driving Major Changes Nikhat Hasan's 'The Tongue': This story by Hasan is a powerful narrative delivering the journey of the female character, Sarah, the daughter of the guard. It reflects her progressing relationship with voice and self-expression. Though, Sarah resides in a land of dumb people she is very much expressive. Her facial features were full of expressions beyond belief defying the traditional belief that a female should always remain silent. "This girl, fourteen or fifteen years old, was talking non-stop despite not having a tongue. She came to the mound carrying lunch for her father, and after dumping the box on the ground, started babbling." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:18). "Even without a tongue, she was chattering non-stop. Her eyes, nose, and ears were expressive beyond belief. Safian was both surprised and angry". (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:20). This story tells about the physical and metaphorical importance of the tongue, as an organ that helps to speak, a tool for communication and also as a symbol of autonomy and identity. If this narrative is seen through the lens of *Écriture féminine*, it is visible that it highlights the complex interplay between silence and voice. The protagonist's struggle to convey her feelings, thoughts, and ideas aligns with the broader experience of women whose voices have been historically marginalized or suppressed. Here, the body of Sarah, particularly her tongue, is a symbol of empowerment, vulnerability, and change. This story is a poignant commentary on the difficulties of women seeking to reclaim their narratives and assert their presence in a world that often seeks to silence them. This story by Nikhat Hasan reflects a deep engagement with the themes of power, identity, language, and the body. This narrative can be seen as an impeccable example which beautifully aligns with the principles of *Écriture féminine* and it also celebrates the complexities of women experiences and challenging the patriarchal structures. The use of tongue is a central motif in the story which allows for a rich exploration of how body and language intersect in the articulation of female identify and resistance.

Maniza Naqvi's 'A Brief Acquaintance': This narrative revolves around the life of Ron, who was in the army, and his interaction with the women he

meets in a café. The concept of femininity lays emphasis on the fluid as well as fragmented nature of identity, moving away from rigid patriarchal norms and structures prevalent in society. In this story, the fleeting and transient nature of Ron's encounters with other characters portrays this fluidity, while suggesting a continuous negotiation of identity and the ever-changing trait of human nature. It also portrays the tendency of human being to crave for love, connections, and sense of belongingness. "Endearing stories that were intended to seduce any listener-male or female wanting to protect him, wrap their arms around him, take him home, or at the very least smile to themselves and say Awwwww!" (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007: 90-91). By analyzing the female characters of the story, one can see the subversion of the male gaze because the women portrayed in this story are not merely objects of Ron's desire but are fully fleshed-out characters who have their own opinions and desires. This narrative can be seen as a revolutionary one which challenges the traditional literary conventions about women. The open-mindedness and ambiguity prevalent in the story reflect the cyclical and non-linear approach favored in *écriture féminine*.

Conclusion

This research paper provides a detailed analysis of the major characters and themes of the nine stories present in the anthology, "Neither Night nor Day" by Rakhshanda Jalil through the perspective of *Écriture féminine*. This anthology provides a poignant exploration of the multifaceted lives of the women in Pakistan and the Pakistani diaspora. The stories discussed in this research paper delve into the themes of identity, self-expression, and the socio-political realities that shape women's experiences. Each narrative discussed here, is unique in itself with different contexts and characters and also collectively weaves a tapestry of struggle, resilience, and hope. The main objective of the author, namely, Rakhshanda Jalil, was to present the conditions of the women during the time of partition in the year 1947. The information about their lives is provided by the women who are living in Pakistan. "My concern in this book has been to present as complete a picture of the everydayness of life as it is lived and experienced by Pakistani women. The majority of writers chosen live in Pakistan; others who live or work abroad have maintained close links with their country." (Neither Night Nor Day, 2007:xi) (From the introduction by Rakhshanda Jalil). In conclusion, these stories are a testament to the enduring spirit of women, who despite the myriad challenges they face, continue to forge their paths with courage and resilience. By applying the concept of *Écriture féminine*, the readers not only get an understanding of the lives of the Pakistani women but also about the broader themes like gender and identity. These stories also reflect the importance of storytelling in today's world and how it can serve as a significant tool of empowerment. These narratives often give voice to silenced experiences and this anthology as a whole provides a greater platform for the women to write, share their opinions, and earn

appreciation in the field of literature. Thereby, also serving as a great example of the concept of feminine.

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