Breaking The Walls of Language: A Constraint-Based Study of Aqib's *When Will These Walls Go Down*

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Abstract

This study explores the poetic and sociolinguistic dimensions of Farzana Aqib's poem *When Will The Walls Go Down* (2021) through the analytical framework of Optimality Theory (OT), originally developed by Prince and Smolensky (2004). The primary objective is to analyze how Aqib strategically violates and satisfies linguistic constraints to create a powerful sociocultural narrative that challenges systemic boundaries- both linguistic and ideological. Using a qualitative approach, this study employs close textual analysis to identify and interpret instances of constraint interaction, particularly the tension between faithfulness (preserving standard linguistic forms) and markedness (allowing deviation for expressive effect). The study reveals that the poet purposefully re-orders constraint rankings to prioritize sociocultural resonance over formal correctness. This linguistic flexibility becomes a mode of resistance, breaking down normative "walls" of language and enabling suppressed voices to emerge. The study contributes to literary linguistics by demonstrating how Optimality Theory can effectively decode poetic deviation and link it to broader sociopolitical contexts. Ultimately, the research offers an understanding of how language operates as both a barrier and a means of liberation in contemporary poetic discourse.

Keywords: Optimality Theory, Farzana Aqib, constraint violation, poetic resistance, linguistic deviation, sociocultural identity, literary linguistics.

Background of the Study

In the field of linguistic analysis, Optimality Theory (OT) offers a powerful framework for understanding how language users prioritize among competing constraints to produce expressive and coherent linguistic forms (Prince & Smolensky, 2004). Poetry, as a genre, often challenges conventional linguistic rules in pursuit of aesthetic, emotional, and social impact. Farzana Aqib's poem *When Will These Walls Go Down* is a compelling example of this intersection between linguistic creativity and sociocultural commentary. By applying OT to this poem, this study explores how the poet negotiates linguistic rules and constraints to articulate themes of love, resistance, and identity within a sociopolitical context.

Statement of the Problem

While Farzana Aqib's poetry has received attention for its emotive power and cultural resonance, there is a lack of linguistic analysis exploring the structural mechanisms she employs. Specifically, no study to date has applied Optimality Theory to analyze her

linguistic choices. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how OT principles manifest in the poem, what linguistic strategies the poet uses, and what sociocultural meanings emerge through these choices.

Literature Review

Optimality Theory, proposed by Prince and Smolensky (1993/2004), suggests that surface linguistic forms are the result of constraint interaction. Constraints are ranked hierarchically, and violations are tolerated if they help satisfy higher-ranked constraints. Scholars such as Kager (1999) and McCarthy (2002) have expanded OT's application to phonology, syntax, and morphology. Literary linguistics, particularly poetic analysis, benefits from OT by revealing how deviations from normativity serve aesthetic and communicative purposes (Archangeli, 1997).

While some studies have examined linguistic deviation in poetry, few have used OT as the guiding framework. This research seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical linguistics and literary analysis by applying OT to Aqib's poem and uncovering how sociocultural themes are embedded in her linguistic forms.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Optimality Theory as its framework (Prince & Smolensky, 2004). According to this theory, how we speak or write is guided by a set of universal rules, known as **constraints**. All languages share these constraints, but each language may rank them differently. There are two main types: **faithfulness constraints**, which try to keep the original form (like correct spelling or grammar), and **markedness constraints**, which allow changes to improve clarity or emotional impact (such as using short or informal expressions in poetry). Not all constraints have the same importance- some are ranked higher than others. This **ranking** means that lower-ranked rules can be broken to follow more important ones. This idea is called **violability**. For example, in poetry, a writer might break grammar rules to create stronger emotion. This is not seen as a mistake but as a creative choice (Prince & Smolensky, 2004).

OT Concept	How It Shows in the Poem
Faithfulness	Standard grammar/spelling (often ignored)
Markedness	Emotion, message, social resistance (highly valued)
Constraint Ranking	Emotional expression is more important than grammar

OT Concept	How It Shows in the Poem
Violability	Rules are broken on purpose to serve meaning and ideology

Methodology

This qualitative study employs textual analysis based on the principles of OT. The poem *When Will These Walls Go Down* by Farzana Aqib (2021) serves as the primary data source. The text is segmented into thematic and structural units and analyzed against four OT principles: faithfulness, markedness, constraint ranking, and violability. Each line is examined for linguistic deviation and evaluated in terms of its contribution to poetic function and sociocultural meaning. The analysis includes in-text citations and examples to support interpretations.

Analysis

Faithfulness

Faithfulness constraints are intentionally violated to create artistic and thematic impact in the poem (**Appendix 1**).

 Examples include:

> *Like the race time redrum* – lexical distortion creates a surreal and emotionally charged image (Aqib, 2021).

> *You will be my darling / Like a the space time continuum* – the syntactic irregularity enhances poetic rhythm (Aqib, 2021).

> *If it'd not now / Tell me when is the right time* – morphological and temporal shifts convey urgency and emotional impatience (Aqib, 2021).

> *When will the walls go down* – repeated questioning conveys emotional intensity and highlights a yearning for liberation (Aqib, 2021).

These examples show a consistent violation of Faithfulness constraints in morphology, syntax, and semantics, where input-output similarity is sacrificed for poetic intensity (Kager, 1999).

Markedness

Marked forms are preferred to generate poetic complexity and sociocultural resonance:

> *Ohh my my* – repetition adds rhythm and reflects emotional disturbance (Aqib, 2021).

> *Red volentine* – a blend of "Valentine" and "volatile" creates a new emotional concept (Aqib, 2021).

> *Beefy browny masculine* – non-standard modifiers emphasize strength and gendered

resilience (Aqib, 2021).

Slow and steady cross the line – omission of subject for prosodic flow and universal implication (Aqib, 2021).

Such deviations illustrate the poet's preference for stylistically marked outputs, prioritizing rhythm and thematic symbolism over linguistic economy (McCarthy, 2002).

Constraint Ranking

The poet prioritizes affective expression over grammatical correctness:

OK with my crime – emotional defiance supersedes grammatical expectations (Aqib, 2021).

Space time continuum – scientific metaphor enriches poetic tone despite syntactic deviation (Aqib, 2021).

In front-line – foregrounds agency and protective love through structural minimalism (Aqib, 2021).

It will win it will shine / Slow and steady cross the line – rhythmic flow outweighs subject-verb clarity (Aqib, 2021).

These lines show that emotional and ideological imperatives often dominate the grammatical constraints within OT's framework (Archangeli, 1997).

Violability

Violations of lower-ranked constraints are common, allowing higher goals to be fulfilled:

Like a the space time continuum – violates determiner rules for poetic fluidity (Aqib, 2021).

Volentine – novel word formation evokes layered emotions (Aqib, 2021).

Ohh my my – redundant repetition enhances emotional emphasis despite violating conciseness (Aqib, 2021).

Tell me / When is the right time (repeated) – repetition violates information economy for thematic emphasis (Aqib, 2021).

Such examples confirm OT's claim that lower-ranked constraints (e.g., grammatical fidelity) may be violated in favor of high-priority poetic objectives (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004).

Sociocultural Meaning

The poem's linguistic deviations reflect resistance against sociocultural constraints. For instance:

When loving you is forbidden / Then I am OK with my crime (Aqib, 2021) challenges

social taboos around love and gender roles.

The repeated calls for *When is the right time* echo a cry for temporal justice and liberation (Aqib, 2021).

Metaphors like *space time continuum* and *red volentine* symbolize emotional complexity and societal rupture (Aqib, 2021).

These linguistic strategies reveal the poem as a form of protest—using OT to map such choices highlights how poetic language negotiates sociocultural power dynamics through constraint interaction.

Discussion

The linguistic analysis of Farzana Aqib's (2021) poem *When Will These Walls Go Down* reveals how Optimality Theory (OT), originally designed for phonological analysis (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004), can be effectively extended to morphosyntactic and stylistic domains in literary texts. The poem's language violates conventional norms in favor of expressive, affective, and thematic constraints, illustrating the OT principle that all constraints are violable and hierarchically ranked.

Faithfulness vs. Markedness

The frequent deviations from standard syntax and morphology, such as in *"a the space time continuum"* or *"red volentine"*, suggest a lower ranking of Faithfulness constraints (which preserve grammatical well-formedness) compared to Markedness constraints (which favor innovative or contextually salient structures) (Kager, 1999; McCarthy, 2002). This deliberate prioritization aligns with Prince and Smolensky's (1993/2004) claim that OT allows constraint violation as long as higher-ranked constraints are satisfied.

The preference for effectively charged expressions like *"OK with my crime"* and *"Ohh my my"* shows that Markedness is utilized to enhance poetic rhythm and socio-emotional depth. As McCarthy (2002) argues, linguistic forms in OT are evaluated not by strict adherence to grammaticality but by their optimality within a context-sensitive constraint hierarchy.

Constraint Ranking and Violability

The poet's stylized use of repetition, neologism, and syntactic dislocation demonstrates dynamic constraint ranking. For instance, *"red volentine"* creates a novel lexical item blending "volatile" and "valentine," thus violating Lexical Integrity but achieving thematic richness. This supports the notion that marked outputs may still be optimal if they satisfy

higher-ranked expressive or thematic constraints (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004). Furthermore, the poet's consistent use of subject-omission (e.g., *"Slow and steady cross the line"*) exemplifies violability- another cornerstone of OT. This supports McCarthy's (2002) observation that certain constraints (like grammatical completeness) may be routinely violated in poetic texts when stylistic or emotive constraints are dominant.

Sociocultural Implications

From a sociocultural perspective, the constraint interactions in the poem mirror the speaker's resistance against patriarchal and societal repression. Lines such as *"When loving you is forbidden / Then I am OK with my crime"* reflect a conscious violation not only of linguistic norms but of social ones, turning personal emotion into an act of resistance. The poet's linguistic innovations thus become tools for socio-political commentary- a point consistent with Kager's (1999) idea that constraint interactions are context-sensitive and can be manipulated to encode meaning beyond mere structure.

The speaker's manipulation of language aligns with the feminist application of OT in stylistics, where constraint violations are seen as emblematic of resistance and identity construction. In this light, the violations in the poem can be interpreted as "empowering deviations" that challenge dominant linguistic and cultural paradigms.

Farzana Aqib employs a wide range of linguistic deviations that align with Optimality Theory's framework. These deviations are not arbitrary but strategically employed to enhance the poem's emotional intensity and sociocultural commentary. The poet violates faithfulness and markedness constraints to foreground the themes of defiance, longing, and love under societal restriction. Under the lens of OT, Aqib's poem exemplifies how artistic language prioritizes higher-ranked constraints like affective impact, rhythmic flow, and thematic depth. The poem serves not only as a personal expression but also as a sociocultural statement advocating emotional freedom and resistance. The study demonstrates the utility of OT in literary analysis, particularly for texts that prioritize affect and resistance over structural conformity.

Findings

The analysis of Farzana Aqib's poem *When Will These Walls Go Down* using Optimality Theory (OT) shows that the poet breaks normal grammar rules, creates new words, and uses unusual punctuation and sentence structure. These choices are not accidental—they help show the speaker's deep emotions and highlight the social issues being discussed.

The study also finds that the poet gives more importance to emotional and thematic expression (called Markedness in OT) than to following grammar rules (called Faithfulness). This supports the idea in OT that language rules can be broken depending on what the speaker wants to express (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004).

For instance, in lines like *"red volentine"* and *"OK with my crime"*, the poet uses unusual language to express strong feelings. This shows that the poet is creatively choosing which rules to follow and which to bend in order to communicate a deeper message (McCarthy, 2002).

Reveals how Aqib constructs a poetic voice that defies normative syntax and semantics in favor of thematic clarity and emotional intensity. For instance, the use of syntactically deviant forms such as *Like a the space time continuum* and neologisms like *red volentine* represent markedness violations that enhance the poem's emotional and rhythmic depth. The poet's repetitive questioning in *If it's not now then / Tell me / When is the right time* exemplifies the prioritization of thematic emphasis over grammatical conformity.

These breaks in language rules also act as a form of protest. The poet's use of non-standard language reflects a rejection of social and gender-based restrictions. In this way, the way the poem is written becomes a powerful tool for feminist expression.

Conclusion

This study shows that Farzana Aqib's poem *When Will These Walls Go Down* uses creative language not just for beauty, but to express strong emotions and challenge social rules. By applying Optimality Theory (OT), we can see that the poet chooses to break some grammar and word-formation rules in order to express feelings more clearly and powerfully.

The poet gives more importance to emotional impact and message (Markedness) than to following standard grammar (Faithfulness). This choice reflects the flexibility and power of language in poetry. According to OT, such rule-breaking is allowed when it helps the speaker achieve a stronger or more meaningful result (Prince & Smolensky, 1993/2004).

The poem is also a form of resistance. Through her language, the poet challenges traditional gender roles and social expectations. The broken or unusual structures in the poem mirror the poet's desire to break free from the walls of oppression. In short, this study highlights how Optimality Theory helps us understand not just the structure of a poem, but also its deeper emotional and social meanings.

References

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Appendix 1

When Will These Walls Go Down:

Ohh my my

Ohh my darling

When is the right time

When will the walls go down

When will I see sunshine

When it's not now

Then tell me

When is the right time

Show me what is hidden in you

What is the fear of thine

If it's not now then

Tell me

When is the right time

When loving you is forbidden

Then I am OK with my crime

If a stone is pelted on you

I will be in front-line

Will it be a blue day

Or a red volentine

Ohh my my

You will be my darling

Like a the space time continuum

Like the race time redrum

Love is never weak

It's beefy browny masculine

It will win it will shine

Slow and steady cross the line

If it'd not now

Tell me when is the right time

—Farzana Aqib 2021