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**A FEMINIST STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY
FICTION USING SARA MILLS' FEMINIST STYLISTICS
FRAMEWORK AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES**



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Abstract

*This research paper conducts a feminist stylistic analysis of contemporary fiction using Sara Mills' feminist stylistics framework. The study examines how gender ideologies and patriarchal norms are embedded, reinforced, or challenged in literary texts through systematic analysis at three interconnected levels: the word level, the phrase/sentence level, and the discourse level. Drawing upon key concepts such as naming strategies, semantic derogation, transitivity, presupposition, focalization, subject-object positioning, and fragmentation, the paper reveals the mechanisms through which language constructs and perpetuates androcentric worldviews while also highlighting instances of female agency and resistance. The analysis is applied to selected contemporary works, including Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures*, Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These case studies demonstrate how linguistic choices influence character construction, narrative perspective, and reader positioning. The paper further discusses global and intersectional dimensions of gendered discourse, particularly in Pakistani and Kuwaiti narratives, and explores linguistic mechanisms of control such as passivization and negation. Ultimately, this study underscores the political nature of feminist stylistics as both an analytical tool and a transformative practice that encourages resistant reading and challenges systemic gender inequalities in literature and society.*

Keywords: *Feminist stylistics, Sara Mills, gender representation, patriarchal discourse, transitivity, focalization, semantic derogation, contemporary fiction, androcentrism, linguistic sexism*

Introduction

1. Theoretical Foundations and the Development of Feminist Stylistics

The evolution of linguistic inquiry has witnessed a decisive shift from the purely descriptive analysis of formal structures toward a more socially grounded and ideologically aware investigation of language in use. At the vanguard of this movement is feminist stylistics, a discipline that bridges the gap between literary criticism and linguistics to uncover how gender ideologies are embedded within and perpetuated by texts (Muhmmad al., 2021). Sara Mills, a central figure in this field, developed a robust framework designed to move beyond the identification of overt sexism, seeking instead to interrogate the very mechanisms of language that construct gendered reality. By examining the word, phrase, and discourse levels, feminist stylistics provides an analytical toolkit for exposing the ways in which patriarchal norms influence both the production and reception of contemporary fiction (Qayyum et al., 2019).

Feminist stylistics is rooted in the fundamental premise that language is not a neutral vehicle for communication but a material entity that shapes and is shaped by social practices. Unlike traditional stylistics, which often prioritizes aesthetic evaluation or the pursuit of an author's unique voice as

an isolated artistic phenomenon, feminist stylistics is inherently political, focusing on the systemic injustice and misrepresentation of women within discourse (Mills, 2005). The discipline draws heavily from poststructuralist thinkers, most notably Michel Foucault, whose theories on power, knowledge, and the construction of subjects through discourse provide the intellectual architecture for the model proposed by Mills (Foucault, 1972).

This framework operates on the understanding that sexism in language is socially and culturally constructed rather than a biological imperative. This perspective allows analysts to examine how male-oriented experience has become the linguistic norm, frequently marginalizing female experiences as "marked" or "other" (Kirsanova, 2018). This androcentrism is not merely a matter of vocabulary; it is a pervasive structural bias that affects the naming of the world and the actors within it. The emergence of feminist stylistics has paved the way for linguists to explore linguistic sexism in texts across a broad spectrum of genres, from canonical literature to advertisements and digital media (Ibrahim, 2020).

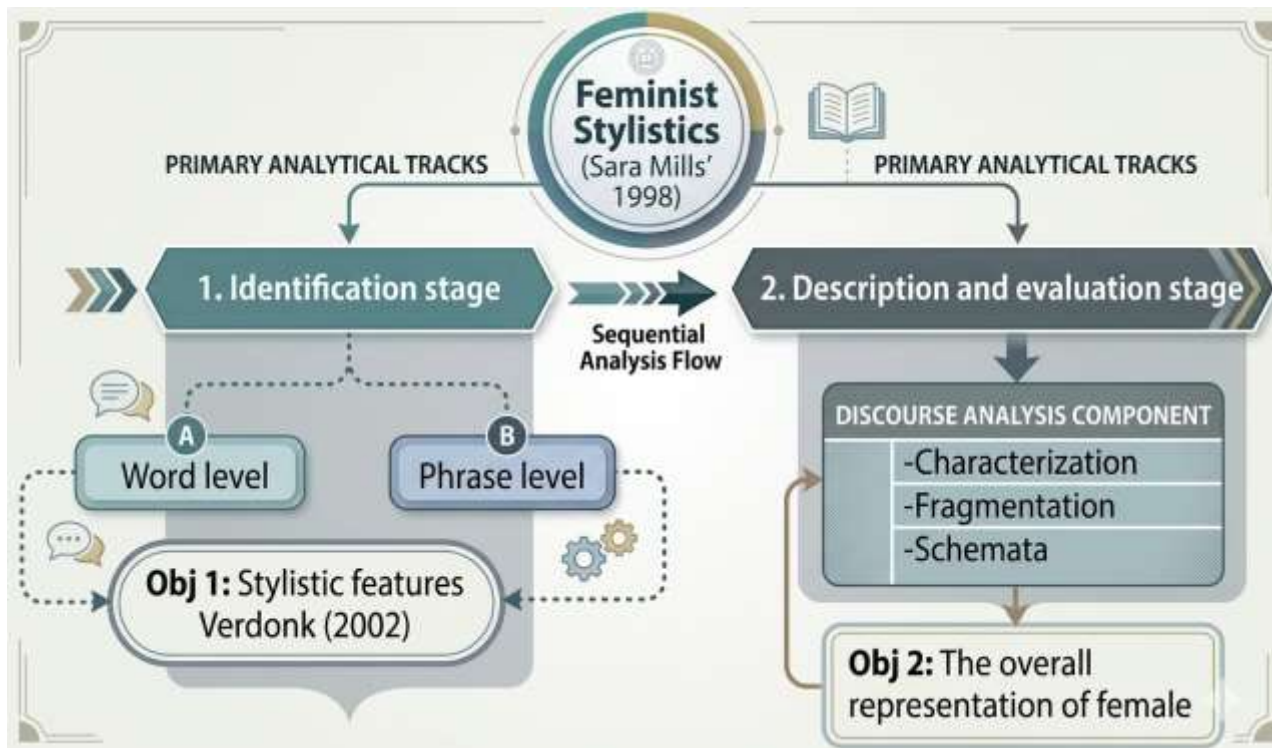


Figure1: Conceptual Framework for Feminist Stylistic Analysis based on Mills (1998) and Verdonk (2002)

1.1 The Dual Model of Production and Reception (Pauwels, 2003).

A critical innovation in the framework is the dual focus on the production and the reception of texts. The production of a text is seen as being dependent on discourse constraints, socio-historical factors, and textual antecedents (Fairclough, 1992). For example, even female writers may unconsciously replicate sexist patterns because they are operating within a patriarchal linguistic system that privileges male perspectives. Consequently, even female writings can reflect language

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sexism, as the dominance of male language in patriarchal societies influences the very tools available for expression (Sunderland, 2004).

Conversely, the reception of a text involves the interaction between the text's ideological structures and the reader's own social positioning. Feminist stylistics encourages a suspicious mode of reading, where the audience is invited to question the assumptions underlying the narrative and to resist being positioned in ways that reinforce gender inequality (Pearce, 1994). When individuals read, they do not always do so suspiciously; they are often accustomed to messages that may not strike them as necessarily oppressive because they view language simply as a tool for ideas rather than a material entity shaping those ideas (Cameron, 1995).

1.2 Distinctions from Conventional Stylistics

Feminist stylistics differentiates itself from conventional stylistics by explicitly incorporating ideology and power relations into the analysis. Traditional studies often focus on sentence structure selection while neglecting the analysis of language in its social usage argues that feminist analysis aims to draw attention to and change the way that gender is represented, as representational practices are often not in the interests of either women or men (Gheni, 2021). The goal is to maximize the stylistic function in discourse analysis, revealing that language choices are inextricably linked to gender politics (Fetterley, 1978).

Table 1: Comparative Features of Conventional and Feminist Stylistics

Feature	Conventional Stylistics	Feminist Stylistics
Primary Focus	Aesthetic style and formal structures	Gendered representation and power dynamics
View of Language	Neutral vehicle for communication	Material entity shaping social reality
Role of Ideology	Often overlooked or secondary	Central to the analysis
Analytical Scope	Authorial voice and literary devices	Word, phrase/sentence, and discourse levels
Objective	Descriptive and evaluative	Political and transformative

2. Systematic Analysis at the Level of the Word

The word level serves as the foundational layer of the feminist stylistic toolkit, focusing on how individual lexical items and naming practices contribute to an androcentric worldview. At this level, the analysis interrogates the use of generic nouns, gender-specific conventions, and the phenomenon of semantic derogation (Alfattah, 2025).

2.1 Naming Strategies and Androcentrism

Naming is a primary site of ideological struggle. In patriarchal discourse, male-oriented terms are often used as the universal norm, such as the use of the generic "he" or "man" to refer to all of humanity (Spender, 1980). This practice renders women invisible within the conceptual landscape of the text, as interpreting such phrases often excludes women from the context. Furthermore, the naming of women often focuses on their relationship to men or their domestic roles rather than their individual identities (Schulz, 1975).

In contemporary fiction, women are frequently referred to by domestic or familial ties, such as

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"wife," "mother," or "housewife," which reduces their identity to activities in the private realm. This construction ties a woman's worth to her domestic role and names her by roles that exist in relation to others. Such labeling reinforces the notion that a woman's primary function is to serve others. This androcentrism is further evidenced in professions where "male" is the unmarked norm, such as "chairman" or "postman," while feminine terms like "nurse" or "secretary" carry heavy stereotypical associations (Lazar, 2005).

2.2 Semantic Derogation and Morphological Asymmetry

Semantic derogation occurs when a word associated with women carries a more negative, trivialized, or sexualized connotation than its male counterpart. This is often visible in lexical pairs where the feminine term has undergone a process of devaluation over time (Perhat, 2025).

Table 2: Semantic Derogation and Connotative Distinctions in Lexical Pairs

Masculine Term	Feminine Term	Connotative Distinction
Master	Mistress	Authority/skill vs. sexual availability
Lord	Lady	Political power vs. honorific title
Actor	Actress	Neutral professional vs. marked gendered form
Bachelor	Spinster	Freedom/glamour vs. social stigma of rejection

Morphological marking further illustrates this asymmetry. The use of suffixes such as "-ess," "-ette," and "-trix" often signals that the feminine form is a secondary, derivative version of the masculine norm. For instance, "waitress" or "actress" marks the professional as female, whereas "waiter" or "actor" is ostensibly neutral but historically masculine. These "minimizing suffixes" can strengthen depreciative characteristics through polysemy, where "-ette" functions both as a gender marker and a diminutive, as in "kitchenette" (David, 2025).

2.3 Lexical Polarity and Adjectival Bias

In the analysis of contemporary literature and speeches, researchers have identified lexical polarity the use of oppositional terms as a tool for constructing transformation or resistance (Litosseliti, 2006). In feminist rhetoric, the transition from "weakness, fear, and hopelessness" to "strength, power, and courage" uses abstract nouns to establish an ethical subject position suitable for larger political movements. Abstract nouns like "rights," "education," "peace," and "dignity" carry feminist ideological beliefs in justice and structural change (Ahmed, 2004).

Conversely, stereotypical descriptions in fiction often pair women with "gentle," "sympathetic," or "passive" adjectives, while men are described through terms of "physical strength," "dominance," and "authority" (Weatherall, 2002). Adjectives used to signify females often emphasize outward appeal and sexuality, whereas those used for the male gender paint them as prevailing and in power. This division reinforces the binary of female passivity and male activity, a theme that stylistics seeks to dismantle by showing how these descriptors are not natural but are stylistic choices reflecting specific power relations (Goffman, 1979).

3. Analysis at the Level of the Phrase and Sentence

The examination of phrases and sentences shifts the focus toward how systematic language choices within clause structures position characters in specific gendered ways. The primary tool used at this

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level is the transitivity model, which assesses how syntactic choices enable or disable characters within the narrative (Ashrafova, 2024).

3.1 Transitivity and the Grammar of Agency

Transitivity analysis allows researchers to determine who is portrayed as the initiator of an action (the actor) and who is the recipient of that action (the goal or receiver). In many patriarchal narratives, men are frequently positioned as the actors in material-action-intention processes actions that are voluntary and demonstrate control over the environment. Women, conversely, are often relegated to supervision processes, where actions happen to them or they are written as being out of control of themselves or their environment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

In contemporary fiction, a high frequency of material processes for male characters correlates with a portrayal of them as active agents, while female characters scoring higher in the position of receivers suggests a state of passivity (Simpson, 2004). This linguistic positioning influences how readers perceive the capacity of characters to act and exert power. For example, active structures and agentive subjects place characters as primary actors in achievements, whereas passive voice can be used to produce meanings that obscure agency (Toolan, 2001).

3.2 Presupposition, Inference, and Metaphor

The phrase level also encompasses the study of ready-made phrases, proverbs, jokes, and metaphors, all of which are based on ideology, stereotypes, and presuppositions. These linguistic shortcuts often rely on shared cultural knowledge that reinforces gender hierarchies (Stwora, 2023).

Table 3: Ideological Functions of Phrases and Sentences in Sexist Discourse

Linguistic Feature	Function in Sexist Discourse	Implications for Gender Roles
Presupposition	Assumes certain "truths" without stating them	Naturalizes female domesticity or weakness
Metaphor	Links femininity to specific objects/concepts	Can trivialize or sexualize female experiences
Jokes/Humor	Uses women as the target of ridicule	Reinforces social distance and subordination
Ready-made Phrases	Employs clichéd gendered expressions	Perpetuates traditional patriarchal perspectives

Metaphors and jokes are particularly powerful because they allow the author to convey sexist meanings without stating them overtly. For instance, a sentence like "She was a good wife and homemaker" presupposes that a woman's value is defined by her domestic roles and her relationship to her husband. Similarly, the use of "empty" or "diminutive" adjectives in describing women's work can serve to trivialize their labor, whereas their absence can suggest that domestic roles are being given weight rather than being minimized (Nursanti, 2022).

4. Analysis at the Level of Discourse

Discourse-level analysis is the most complex tier of the framework, moving beyond the individual sentence to examine the larger structures and ideological patterns that determine the occurrence of

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lexical patterns and their effect on readers. This level focuses on character construction, fragmentation, focalization, and the positioning of subjects and objects (Hussain et al., 2021).

4.1 Subject-Object Positioning and Narrative Voice

A core concept in feminist discourse analysis is the subject-object position, which emphasizes how events are seen and from whose perspective they are narrated (Mills, 1995). The subject is the party who holds the power to observe, evaluate, or describe, while the object is the party who is observed and evaluated. In many texts, women are positioned as passive objects, defined and used as storytelling material without the power to tell their own side (Maknun et al., 2023).

Actors who act as subjects are assumed to have the opportunity to define and image themselves, thereby conveying their own reality. Conversely, when women are portrayed as objects, the author tells the story from a male side, leading to one-sided definitions of their viewpoints. This dual positioning highlights the complexity of their struggles within a narrative, particularly when they attempt to transition from object to subject (Salih & Abdulrahman, 2025).

4.2 Focalization and the Male Gaze

Focalization refers to the perspective or point of view through which the narrative is presented asserts that focalization through a male's experience inevitably represents the female as the object of the male gaze. This concept, derived from film studies, highlights how narrative structures can position women as passive targets of male observation and desire (Mills, 1995).

By contrast, narratives that center women's perspectives validate their agency and leadership, positioning them as central sources of knowledge and authority. This shifts the power balance by granting them epistemic authority.

Analysis at the discourse level examines how textual elements and external social forces influence how characters are built and deciphered, looking at who is given voice and who is silenced within the narrative (Maknun et al., 2023).

4.3 Fragmentation and the Anatomical Body

Fragmentation is the textual practice of describing characters as a collection of anatomical parts rather than as whole human beings. This is analyzed as a mechanism of power that sustains hierarchically gendered social orders (Shilling, 2012). While both male and female bodies may be fragmented in a text, the nature of this fragmentation differs significantly.

- **Female Fragmentation:** Women's bodies are often broken into parts to accentuate their sexuality and physical beauty, portraying them as attractive natural objects (Mulvey, 1975).
- **Male Fragmentation:** Men's bodily components are typically used to showcase physical prowess, skills, aptitude, and personality traits (Bordo, 1999).

This "figural body" superimposes cultural aspects and social prejudices onto the character, reinforcing the objectification of the female subject. Even in modern media like social media or commercials, stereotypical feminine qualities are prevalent in stylistic choices that sexualize women as a marketing strategy (Gill, 2007).

5. Application to Contemporary Fiction: Case Studies

The practical application of this framework is best demonstrated through detailed case studies of contemporary fiction. These analyses highlight how linguistic choices across all levels intersect to

create complex portrayals of gender and resistance (Sinaga et al., 2025).

5.1 Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*: Migration and Transitivity

Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* provides a rich text for examining the journey of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant woman navigating patriarchal control in London. The novel traces her evolution from a compliant, dependent wife into a self-reliant, empowered individual (Upstone, 2007).

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of transitivity in the novel reveals that female characters initially appear more frequently in the position of receivers and goals for material processes (Hidalgo, 2010). Nazneen’s move from a rural village in Bangladesh to an urban environment in London symbolizes a vast transformation, yet her early experience of migration is framed by isolation and cultural dislocation. Her husband, Chanu, exerts psychological oppression, maintaining strict cultural practices that highlight the tension between identity preservation and adjustment to a new country (Perfect, 2008).

5.2 Margot Lee Shetterly’s *Hidden Figures*: Constructing Intellectual Agency

In *Hidden Figures*, linguistic features at the word, sentence, and discourse levels are used to construct the representation of women’s intelligence and feminist values. This study identifies 226 linguistic data points that explicitly build women’s intellectual capacity through language (AlSakkaf & Öztürk, 2024).

Table 4: Distribution of Linguistic Data in *Hidden Figures* Analysis

Analysis Level	Data Identified	Percentage	Key Stylistic Function
Word Level	91 data points	39.8%	Generic pronouns used to expose bias and resilience
Sentence Level	77 data points	31.1%	Presuppositions challenge societal assumptions
Discourse Level	58 data points	25.4%	Focalization centers female experience and leadership

The analysis reveals that focalization is the most frequent discourse-level feature, centering on the perspectives of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. By positioning these women as agentive subjects rather than passive observers, the novel challenges stereotypes that equate intelligence with masculinity and portrays African-American women as intellectual authorities in science (Maknun et al., 2023).

5.3 Naomi Alderman’s *The Power*: Linguistic Sexism in Speculative Fiction

Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* offers a unique case where the narrative inverts traditional gender roles, yet a feminist stylistic analysis reveals that the text is not entirely free from sexist word choices. The study adopts a qualitative method to identify biased uses of language at the lexical level (Salih & Abdulrahman, 2025).

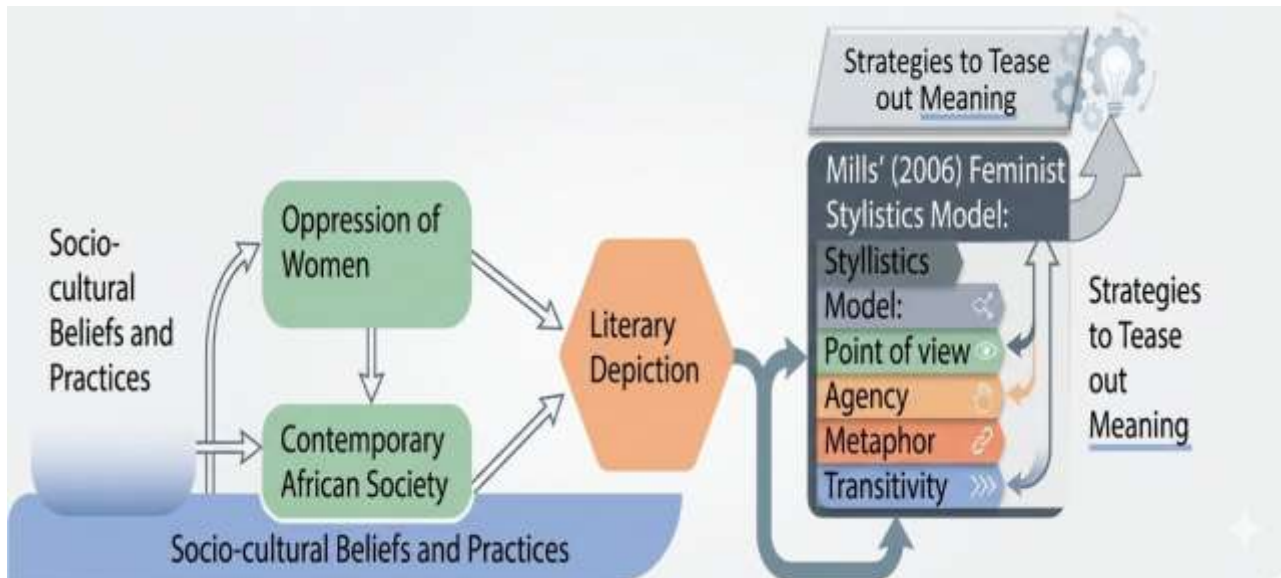


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Feminist Stylistics in Contemporary African Literary Depictions

Results show that the author utilized negative language to portray women, including the use of generic nouns and naming conventions that reflect androcentrism. This demonstrates a core principle of the framework: the dominance of male language in patriarchal societies influences even female writers, often leading them to unconsciously adopt these patterns (Muhmmad al., 2021). At the sentence level, the study identified the use of metaphors, jokes, and presuppositions that continue to reflect sexist ideologies despite the novel's overarching theme of female empowerment (Qayyum et al., 2019).

5.4 Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: Domesticity and Resistance

The portrayal of domesticity in Angelou's memoir is examined through a feminist stylistic lens to understand how language creates and mediates female agency within domestic spaces. The memoir deliberately uses abstract nouns, modification, and nominalization to reconstruct domesticity as a politically contested realm (Kirsanova, 2018).

While domestic spaces may be depicted using gendered nouns and diminutive adjectives to suit societal expectations, the absence of these forms in certain passages suggests a fundamental principle: the opposition to the trivialization of women's labor. The language of domesticity in the text actively creates female subjectivity rather than acting as a passive backdrop, frequently striking a balance between resistance to and conformity with patriarchal norms (Sunderland, 2004).

6. Global Perspectives and Intersectional Struggles

Contemporary feminist stylistics increasingly recognizes the importance of considering contextual elements such as race, class, and nationality. The practice of isolating a text for analysis without these considerations is deemed an outdated inheritance (Beyer, 2025).

6.1 Discrimination in Pakistani and Kuwaiti Narratives

A study of *Beyond the Fields* by Aysha Baqir reveals the sexism and gender stereotyping prevalent in rural Pakistani settings. The novel depicts a narrow mentality where women are expected to stay within the home, and terms like "chores" have negative applications, implying the sole purpose of their lives is to serve their in-laws (Baqir, 2019). Similarly, the drama series *The Exchange* investigates discrimination in the workplace in 1980s Kuwait, where stock exchange work was considered a male domain. The analysis identified marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, and excessive workload as primary forms of discrimination (Gheni, 2021).

7. Linguistic Mechanisms of Control: Passivization and Negation

At the sentence level, grammatical structures such as passivization and negation serve as mechanisms of control that encode gendered subordination. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, passivization operates to conceal male or institutional agency, thereby naturalizing female subjugation. By removing the active subject from the sentence, the text makes the oppression of women appear as an inherent state of affairs rather than the result of specific male actions (Salih & Abdulrahman, 2025).

8. Conclusion

This feminist stylistic analysis of contemporary fiction, grounded in Sara Mills' comprehensive framework, has demonstrated that language is far from a neutral medium of expression. Instead, it functions as a powerful ideological instrument that both reflects and reproduces patriarchal structures while simultaneously offering spaces for resistance and subversion. Through a systematic examination across the word, phrase/sentence, and discourse levels, the study has uncovered how naming practices, semantic derogation, transitivity patterns, presuppositions, focalization, and bodily fragmentation work together to construct gendered subjectivities in literary texts. The case studies of *Brick Lane*, *Hidden Figures*, *The Power*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* illustrate the complex interplay between linguistic choices and character agency. While many narratives initially position female characters as passive recipients of actions or objects of the male gaze, several texts also reveal pathways toward empowerment through increased transitivity, female-centered focalization, and the reconstruction of domestic spaces as sites of resistance. Even in works that consciously attempt to invert gender power dynamics, such as *The Power*, traces of androcentric language persist, highlighting the deep entrenchment of patriarchal linguistic norms that influence even progressive or female-authored texts. Furthermore, the analysis has emphasized the importance of intersectionality, showing how gender intersects with race, class, migration, and cultural context in Pakistani and Kuwaiti narratives. Linguistic mechanisms such as passivization and negation serve to naturalize female subordination, yet conscious stylistic choices can disrupt these patterns and create alternative subject positions for women. Ultimately, feminist stylistics proves to be not merely a descriptive methodology but a politically engaged practice. By making visible the often invisible operations of gendered language, it equips readers and critics with the tools to engage in resistant reading and to imagine more equitable representational practices. As contemporary fiction continues to evolve, ongoing feminist stylistic scholarship remains essential for challenging systemic inequalities and fostering narratives that affirm the full humanity and agency of women across diverse social, cultural, and global contexts. Future research could expand this framework by incorporating digital narratives, multimodal texts, and more diverse global

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voices to further enrich our understanding of how language shapes and can potentially transform gendered realities.

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