

Research Article

Voicing the Voiceless: Feminist Resistance in Kishwar Naheed's *I Am Not That Woman*

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Abstract

In literature across the globe, there are voices for the voiced less and the voices of the voiceless too by the creative and the critical sensibility with regard to discrimination, oppression, suppression, marginalization, polarization, social segregation etc., in the domains of languages, regions and culture where human amalgamation needs to negotiate in the natural process of the universe. Keeping this view in mind, the present paper aims to look at Kishwar Naheed's "I Am Not That Woman" as a poem of voice of the voiceless. It also attempts to look Naheed's creative sensibility towards the patriarchal constraints that restrains the equality to womanhood with particular reference to the poem mentioned above.

Keywords: Voiced less, voice less, creative sensibility, suppression, marginalization, human amalgamation, social constraints, patria.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a powerful medium for articulating the experiences of individuals and communities whose voices have been marginalized by dominant social, political, and cultural structures. Across civilizations and literary traditions, writers have challenged systems of discrimination, oppression, exclusion, and inequality by representing the lives and struggles of those who remain unheard. Among these literary interventions, feminist literature occupies a significant place in questioning patriarchal ideologies and reclaiming women's identities. It provides a platform for women to narrate their lived experiences, challenge gender stereotypes, and assert their agency in societies where their voices have historically been silenced. Consequently, feminist poetry has evolved as a powerful instrument of resistance, transforming personal experiences into collective expressions of protest and empowerment.

South Asian feminist literature, in particular, reflects the complex intersections of gender, culture, religion, and socio-political realities. Women writers from the region have consistently questioned patriarchal norms that regulate women's lives through restrictive customs, social expectations, and institutionalized inequalities. Their writings foreground issues such as gender discrimination, identity, bodily autonomy, social exclusion, and freedom of expression while advocating dignity, equality, and justice. Within this literary tradition, Kishwar Naheed occupies a distinguished position as one of the most influential feminist poets writing in Urdu. Her poetry transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, addressing universal concerns about women's oppression and resistance while remaining deeply rooted in the socio-cultural realities of South Asia.

Kishwar Naheed's poem *I Am Not That Woman* stands as one of the most compelling poetic expressions of feminist consciousness in contemporary South Asian literature. The poem

challenges the conventional representation of women as passive, submissive, and voiceless beings who exist merely to satisfy patriarchal expectations. Instead, Naheed presents a woman who refuses to accept socially constructed identities imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Through bold imagery, powerful metaphors, symbolic expressions, and repetitive assertions, the speaker rejects objectification, questions gendered oppression, and proclaims her individuality with remarkable confidence. The recurring declaration, "*I am not that woman*," functions as both a personal affirmation and a collective manifesto for women seeking liberation from centuries of social and cultural subjugation.

The poem further explores the multifaceted nature of patriarchal control through images of confinement, commodification, and invisibility. References to walls, veils, locked doors, stones, and darkness symbolize the physical, psychological, and ideological barriers erected against women, while contrasting images of light, freedom, flowers, and voice represent resilience, hope, and self-assertion. Naheed effectively transforms these metaphors into instruments of feminist resistance, demonstrating that women's voices cannot be permanently suppressed despite persistent attempts to silence them. Her poetic discourse moves beyond individual suffering to articulate the collective aspirations of women who continue to negotiate systems of inequality across cultures and societies.

The significance of *I Am Not That Woman* lies not merely in its criticism of patriarchal oppression but also in its celebration of female agency and selfhood. The poem redefines womanhood by rejecting stereotypes that reduce women to commodities, symbols of chastity, or burdens within familial and social structures. Instead, it presents women as independent individuals capable of shaping their own identities and participating equally in society. Naheed's poetic voice thus becomes representative of countless women whose struggles remain unrecognized yet whose resilience continues to challenge oppressive structures.

Viewed through the lens of feminist literary criticism, the poem reveals the interconnectedness of gender, power, identity, and resistance. It resonates with the theoretical perspectives of feminist scholars who argue that women's writing serves not only as artistic expression but also as a political act of reclaiming agency from patriarchal discourse. Naheed's poetry embodies this transformative potential by converting silence into speech, invisibility into visibility, and oppression into resistance. Her work consequently contributes to the broader feminist project of dismantling hierarchical power structures and advocating gender justice.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines Kishwar Naheed's *I Am Not That Woman* as a poetic articulation of the **voice of the voiceless**. It analyses how the poem foregrounds the experiences of marginalized women through its feminist discourse, symbolic imagery, and assertive poetic voice. The paper also investigates Naheed's creative sensibility in exposing patriarchal constraints and examines the ways in which the poem reclaims female identity, dignity, and agency. Ultimately, the study argues that *I Am Not That Woman* is not merely a poem of protest but a powerful literary manifesto that transforms silence into resistance and empowers women to redefine themselves beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal society.

The poem throws light on the context of patriarchal society using vivid imagery and metaphor to reflect on women who are objectified and confined. Kishwar Naheed, a prominent voice in Pakistani feminine literature, draws from her own experiences to voice the unvoiced individual as well as collective pain and resistance of women who are denied of basic freedom and dignity. At the outset of the poem, the poetess ignites the readers to question what it means to be defined by others, especially in terms of gender roles. She says,

***'I am not that woman
Selling you socks and shoes!...' (Kishwar).***

The poem initiates a feminine discourse on reclaiming one's identity and standing against unjust societal norms. She continues her claim using the metaphors 'stone' and 'breeze' to denote the male dominancy as well as male's excessive freedom that is as hard as the stone and as free as the breeze is and also warns the male dominance that the same stone cannot smother women's freedom and potentiality.

***'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..' (Kishwar)***

Her firmness and stability is further well reinstated in the lost line too,

'That my voice cannot be smothered by stones' (Kishwar).

It opens a window to understand feminism not as a rejection of tradition, but as a demand for individual dignity, equality and self-expression. Kishwar always tries to identify the larger societal issues that are truly addressed in all her poems particularly the preset poem in detail. Moreover, she relates these issues to readers' own experiences and observations.

Kishwar Naheed as a renowned Pakistani poet, known for her bold and unapologetic voice in contemporary feminist literature born in the era of 1940 in Bulandshahr, India, and later settled in Pakistan, she rose to prominence through her fearless and mid blowing writings that challenged patriarchal norms and advocated the gender equality. Her present poem is deeply rooted in personal experience as well as the socio-political struggles of women in South Asia or the rest of the world. She is one of the leading figures of the '**We Sinful Women**' movement that redefined feminist discourse in Urdu poetry. To further reinstate the acceptance, '**I Am Not That Woman**' is one of Naheed's most widely recognized poems undoubtedly. It reflects her commitment to highlighting the exploitation, silencing and commodification of women in a male-dominated society. The speaker in the poem refutes the image of a submissive and voiceless woman that society tries to make her numb and dump. Using powerful metaphors and courageous repetitions, she has crafted this poem to be a declaration of identity and resistance.

Kishwar's other skill is in adopting a strong and assertive tone throughout the poem. Her voice challenges the accepted image of women who are confined to domestic roles and denied agency. She also portrays how women are churned in the name of custom and tradition in the subsequent lines. She says again,

***'I am the one you crushed
With the weight of custom and tradition.....' (Kishwar)***

The repetition of the line '**I am not that woman**' serves as a persistent refusal of all imposed stereotypes. She criticises the way women are put on display in shop windows, hidden behind veils and locked behind doors-symbols that represent social and physical restrictions placed upon the women. The speaker in the poem not only draws the readers' attention to gender discrimination but also emphasizes resilience and empowerment. Despite all forms of suppression and oppression, the speaker in the poem claims her voice and existence as humane. The lines express not just protest but also a celebration of a woman's courage to rise against her suppressors. This duality of resistance and empowerment is an assurance of Naheed's feminine vision that is boldly stated in the following lines where the woman's indomitable spirit is metaphorically referred as 'light' and the male dominancy as 'darkness'.

***'Not knowing
That light cannot be hidden in darkness...' (Kishwar).***

It is needless to say that the poem draws attention to issues that are personal, cultural and political rooted deeply in everyday experiences of gender-based marginalization. Kishwar's life and involvement offer a valuable context for reading this poem. As a woman who faced

considerable societal pressures herself, her poetic voice carries authenticity and urgency. She uses poetry as a platform to sing truth to power and to validate the lives of women who are often pushed into the mode of mute. The poet's intention is not merely to criticise society but to inspire transformation through awareness and assertiveness that can be seen here below lines,

***'Remember me,
I am the one in whose lap
You picked flowers
And planted thorns and embers...' (Kishwar).***

Apart from this, the poem holds enduring relevance in any society that continues to grapple with gender discrimination. The paradoxical attitude of the male society is clearly reflected in the metaphors 'flowers' and 'embers'- ***'I am the one in whose lap.....planted thorns and embers...'*** These metaphors indicate to all who refuse to be confined by imposed identities and who dare to define themselves through courage, experience and self-respect. Kishwar Naheed's contribution through the metaphors in the poem is not only literary acclaim but also deeply humanistic and transformative.

To broaden the perception on this poem, the metaphor of a woman in a male dominated society as reflected in these lines-

***'sold in the name of her chastity.... and
I am the one you married off
To get rid of a burden....' (Kishwar)***

is a critique on how women's value is often reduced to their sexual purity and how women are traded in the process of marriage that has been an instrument of getting rid of a burden. This objectification continues with the image of a woman put behind curtains, denied freedom of movement and forced to live in obscurity. These lines emphasize how cultural practices confine and suppress female identity as a burden on 'father' if not arranged marriage or married off. In continuation of the discourse in the poem, the poet sets the readers forward with images of isolation and control. References to the metaphors 'veils' and 'locked doors' **(Kishwar)** that symbolize how women are denied the opportunity of living freely and expressing about themselves are aptly employed in the poem. The speaker insists that despite these restrictions, her indomitable spirit cannot be crushed or 'smothered'. She does not surrender to the constraints placed before her but continues to rise and voice against the confinement. The speaker draws a contrast between the speaker's reality and the constructed image of a silent woman. This contrast is not only verbal but also emotional. While society expects compliance, the speaker offers confidence. Even when others impose invisibility, she claims visibility. This duality is poetically well balanced by the poet throughout the poem.

Further, technically the poem is well crafted into a sonnet tone where a problem is raised in the first part and later part it is resolved - in the first part of the poem the woman is set to a declaration of rebellion. The speaker reclaims her identity from those who seek to define her. Her tone is proud and unafraid, filled with conviction. In the second part, the stage is set where the poet expands on woman's defiance and highlights her indomitable spirit against the confinement. The focus continues through the poem the refusal of being silenced or stereotyped or her demand for recognition and her assertion of urgency rather a resistance that challenges long-held cultural narratives.

In the second part of 'I Am Not That Woman', the speaker builds on her earlier declaration of resistance by asserting her accomplishments and capabilities. She describes how, despite the restrictions imposed upon her, she has the ability to manage and contribute meaningfully to the societal needs and how she has been used in the society in the following lines,

***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! (Kishwar)***

Thus, Kishwar questions throughout the poem that women had been the commodity that had been traded in the disguise of 'chastity', 'motherhood' and her 'loyalty'. The present notion of motherhood paves way to mushrooming of fertility centres across the globe involving a lot of huge capital investments leading to neo-capitalism which is anti-democratic capitalism. In the last line, she boldly announces with the repetition, '**No, no, I am not.....**' (Kishwar) stating that now she works, writes, earns recognition and participates in the world with dignity and strength.

***'That I can walk on water
When I am drowning...' (Kishwar)***

The assertions she made throughout the poem serve as powerful denials to those who sought to silence or control women. With his tone, the poem takes a more direct and assertive tone in this segment, moving from critique to celebration. The speaker lists her achievements not as a way to seek validation but as proof that imposed barriers have not broken her spirit. Her ability to write and create is not only an act of resistance but also a form of liberation. She turns the tools of suppression into instruments of expression and empowerment. The speaker challenges those who attempt to reduce her to a shadow or an object. She ridicules their failure to understand that her voice is not dependent on their permission. This moment, in the poem, highlights the transformation of the speaker from a passive recipient of injustice to an active agent of change. Her language becomes increasingly confident and her imagery more empowering. By asserting her resilience and refusing to be diminished, the speaker not only claims her own space but also represents a collective assertion of dignity by all those who have been silenced. The poem speaks across boundaries of culture and geography, voicing a universal need for recognition, equality and respect.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet successfully portrays the woman's journey from resistance to affirmation. It underlines the message that true freedom is not granted by others but claimed through inner strength and persistent expression. Kishwar Naheed's poem becomes a source of inspiration for those seeking to reclaim their identities and assert their rightful place in society or a poem of voice to the voiceless.

The technical aspect of the poem, stylistically, is that it is written in free verse with a conversational yet forceful rhythm. There are no rigid structures or rhyme schemes, mirroring the content's challenge to conventional boundaries. The simplicity of language enhances its readability, while the meaningful imagery gives it emotional intensity allowing the message to flow naturally and with emotional force. There is no artificial constraint in form, echoing the poet's desire to break free from societal constraints. The conversational yet powerful tone invites the reader to listen, reflect and acknowledge the speaker's truth. Kishwar Naheed uses metaphors such as 'shining sun' and 'rising flame' to describe the speaker's presence in the world. These images are symbolic of vitality, strength and renewal. The poet's use of such elemental symbols underlines the idea that a woman's strength comes from within and cannot be extinguished by external forces. The poem thus reclaims womanhood from the shadows and places it in the centre of life and creation.

Conclusion

Kishwar Naheed's *I Am Not That Woman* stands as a powerful poetic manifesto of feminist resistance, giving voice to women who have long been silenced by patriarchal structures and socio-cultural conventions. Through compelling imagery, symbolic metaphors, assertive

repetition, and an unwavering poetic voice, Naheed challenges the objectification, commodification, and marginalization of women while affirming their dignity, agency, and right to self-expression. The poem transcends its immediate socio-cultural context to address the universal experiences of women confronting discrimination and gender inequality across the world. By transforming silence into resistance and oppression into empowerment, Naheed not only exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal domination but also celebrates the indomitable spirit of women who refuse to be defined by imposed identities. Her creative sensibility successfully bridges the personal and the political, making the poem both a literary achievement and a social intervention. The recurring assertion, "*I am not that woman*," emerges as a collective declaration of selfhood, resilience, and liberation, encouraging women to reclaim their identities and challenge oppressive social norms. Ultimately, *I Am Not That Woman* is more than a feminist poem; it is a timeless expression of human dignity, equality, and justice that continues to inspire readers across generations. As a profound **voice of the voiceless**, the poem reinforces the transformative power of literature in questioning injustice, reshaping social consciousness, and envisioning a more equitable and inclusive world.

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