

## A Feminist Counter-Reading of *Indian Women*

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### Abstract

Critical linguists, including feminists, argue that language is not a value-free medium reflecting the world but a medium of constructing it. In every use of language, writers have at their disposal a wide repertoire of options, albeit within a restricted set of parameters. The selections they make are calculated and signpost ideological positioning. Stylistics offers a systematic approach to the analysis of language use and the description of ideological positions and three of its ambitions have been identified: to support existing interpretations of texts, to suggest new interpretations, and to establish general points about how meaning is made (Barry, 2002). In this paper, I demonstrate how stylistic analysis can be used to investigate women representation in texts and offer a feminist counter-reading of an existing interpretive claim. The analysis in question is Prabhat K. Singh's interpretation of *Indian Women* by Shiv K. Kumar, which he saw as a glorification of Indian women's integrity, richness and faith. Singh also argues the women in the poem serve as a "metaphor for feminine beauty, chastity, patience, love and trust" (Singh, 2001, p. 107). However, detailed linguistic evidence reveals the tensions and inconsistencies in Singh's reading, and demonstrates how his positive construction of Indian women is based on a few selected details that do not allow a more thorough and coherent view of the poem. Stylistic analysis is used to demonstrate how a particular interpretation has been privileged and other interpretive possibilities downplayed, and provide an alternative reading sustained by a consideration of all aspects of the linguistic make-up of the text. The image resulting from the analysis is much less favorable than the one provided by Singh's interpretation. Kumar has indeed constructed Indian women as powerless, inactive and silenced, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles in patriarchal cultures.

**Keywords:** stylistic analysis, feminist criticism, Indian poetry, literary interpretation

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is a branch of literary theory which attracted much scholarly attention in the 1970s, though the origin of feminist activism is traceable to more than a hundred years earlier. Its aim is to "examine the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women." (Tyson, 2006, p. 83). Feminist critics argue that women are oppressed by traditional gender roles and that this sexist ideology in patriarchal cultures goes unchallenged. Women are given marginal stereotypical roles, their presence is restricted and their voice silenced. In their work, feminist critics problematize these stereotypical representations and the construction of feminine identity.

According to Mills (1995), feminists believe that society is organized to the advantage of men, and manifestations of culture, including language, portray this sexist organization. Like other critical linguists, therefore, feminists argue that language is not a value-free medium reflecting the world but a medium of constructing it. It is a means of ideological control. The choices that authors make, therefore, are calculated and signpost ideological positioning. In male-authored texts, language is a tool of masculine dominance. It is used to promote a world view in which men are central and women peripheral. The point of view, the choice of pronouns, transitivity and agency choices, and the semantic prosody of lexical items all contribute to the construction of sexist ideology.

In this context, feminist criticism becomes a form of resistance. Feminists criticize the construction of women as feminine in literary texts, and resist this 'enforced' patriarchal order. Because this stereotypical construal of

women is maintained through linguistic choice, the primary form of resistance is language. Feminists (e.g., Burton, 1982; Cameron, 1985; Middleton, 1992; Mills, 1995) drew on linguistics for tools of analysis in the investigation of gender representation. In fact, Mills adopts the descriptive apparatus of stylistics because of its attention to “why authors have chosen certain ways to express themselves rather than others, and how certain effects are achieved through language” (1995, p. 4). Following the tradition of Mills, this paper adopts stylistics as a method of interrogating sexist ideology in texts. The following is a brief outline of stylistics which focuses on the nature of its analytic framework and its appropriateness for the analysis of poetry.

### 1.2 *Stylistics and Poetry*

Poetic discourse is marked by deviation at the level of, among others, representation of experience. Vertically assembled on the page, a poem is self-contained and dissociated from the immediacy of social reality (Widdowson, 1992). It denies readers immediate reference to the world outside the text and so they can only return to “the language itself enclosed within the confines of the poem” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 32) to find clues that might help in the process of interpretation. Accordingly, poems are read as though they were paintings. The details in a painting may very much ‘seem’ to replicate a familiar scene but the artistic effect of the painting is lost if we take the painting to be no more than a replica of what we already know. Reading an artistic work is not about reading meanings *off* the structures, meanings which are ‘there’ and that we already know and can easily accommodate within our schematic knowledge of the world. Instead, a reader reads meanings *into* the structures of poems, thus maximizing the artistic value and communicative potential of their every linguistic detail. The reader assumes an authorial role but one restricted by the language choices in the text (Fish, 1980).

This unique feature of poetic discourse calls for an approach that assigns primacy of place to language. This is the role of stylistics. It looks systematically at the formal features of a text and determines their functional significance (Wales, 1989), thus providing solid evidence for interpretation. In addition, stylistic analysis is as much concerned with what writers do *with* language as with what they do *through* language. According to Simpson, “[s]tylistics is about interrogating texts” (2004, p. 101). By ‘interrogating’ the textual choices and comparing them with other stylistic possibilities, we make interpretive judgments about the text’s meaning and effect.

The systematic approach to language analysis, or stylistics, in fact grew as a “reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies” (Fish, 1980, p. 69). Literary criticism at the turn of the twentieth century tended to be based on historical context or authorial intentions (Stockwell, 2006). Critical interpretations in this tradition were impressionistic and there was more reference to extra-textual than textual evidence. Criticism then took on a more language-based approach to interpretation due to the influence of European structuralism (arising out of Saussurean semiology and Russian Formalism), Anglo-American literary criticism (Practical Criticism and New Criticism), and of course the rapidly growing field of linguistics (Fowler, 1981). The formalists, the new critics and the practical critics’ work all shared a preoccupation with the word on the page and an attempt to produce less impressionistic critical statements based on textual evidence. Stylistics built on the successes of these schools and allied itself more closely with linguistics which provided it with the analytical descriptive framework. The objective of stylisticians was to substitute the subjective, impressionistic literary critical statements with “precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions, and to proceed from those descriptions to interpretations for which they claim a measure of objectivity” (Fish, 1981, p. 70). The popular ‘claim and quote’ strategy for making critical statements about a text gave way to a more structured, and less subjective, method of text interpretation.

Stylisticians (e.g., Short, 1996; Simpson, 2004) argue that good stylistic analyses are explicit, detailed and systematic. Stylistic analyses should be based on explicit criteria – criteria which are agreed upon by stylisticians and which enable other analysts to retrieve the method of analysis. Retrievability ensures that the analytical framework employed is “clear enough to be able to be challenged by other researchers, either by replication of the original work, or by the application of the findings to new data” (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, p. 24). Stylistic analyses should also provide detailed descriptions at different levels of linguistic organization, resulting in “multi-levelled” and systematic descriptions (Simpson, 2004, p. 5).

Three ambitions of stylistics have been identified in the literature: to provide data to support existing interpretations of texts, to suggest new interpretations of texts, and to establish general points about how meaning is made (Barry, 2002). In this paper, I demonstrate how stylistic analysis can be used to offer a feminist counter-reading of existing interpretive claims. The aim is not to propose a new interpretation, though this is not an unwelcome add-on, but indeed to demonstrate how detailed stylistic analysis can be used to counter-argue the interpretive claims of an existing reading.

The stylistic analysis proposed will be used to show how meaning has been made by the poet and what image of Indian women has been constructed by the text as opposed to the one resulting from Singh's interpretation. In other words, I intend to "read the text against itself" (Barry, 2002, p. 73) in order to demonstrate its internal inconsistency and necessary incompleteness. The procedures that will be employed include exposing misconceptions and detecting omissions.

## 2. The Methodology

I will start by presenting Singh's interpretation of *Indian Women*. The discussion then proceeds to underline how this interpretation of the poem survives on omissions and internal inconsistencies. This 'oppositional' reading is not meant to invalidate the critic's interpretive claims but instead to show that it is skewed to a positive construction of Indian women, a reading which is based on selective evidence.

The poem will then be subjected to a detailed stylistic analysis, which consists of two parts: a general interpretation worked from the title and initial readings of the poem, which serves as a working interpretive hypothesis. It is a first response to the poem guided by the schemata activated on the initial readings. As more linguistic evidence is gathered, the interpretive hypothesis will be upheld, modified or even refuted in the course of the analysis. In the second part, the proposed interpretive hypothesis is verified against the authorial linguistic choices, conventional and unconventional, at every level of language structure. Every stylistic choice which a poet makes is conscious and is considered significant. There are choices which are more conscious, and consequently more significant, and the analysis starts with a consideration of these choices.

In order for the analysis to be detailed and thorough (a distinguishing characteristic of all stylistic analyses), all the linguistic evidence needs to be considered. But considering all the evidence at once can be frustrating. A text attack strategy, one that is well established in the stylistics literature, is to start with those linguistic features which are more prominent and then move on to consider the less prominent authorial choices. In other words, the analysis starts with the linguistic features which have stylistic significance, i.e., those features which draw attention to themselves by virtue of their violation of our language expectations. In stylistic parlance, precedence is given to the linguistic choices which have been 'foregrounded' by making an unpredictable choice (deviation). These choices constitute an incongruity between expectation and usage and therefore draw attention to themselves and invite interpretation (van Peer, Hakemulder and Zyngier, 2007). The analysis makes extensive, but not exclusive, reference to these deviant choices and, in due course, proceeds to a consideration of the non-deviant authorial linguistic choices.

As it should be detailed and thorough, so should the analysis be systematic. Systematicity is used here to refer to considering authorial choices (deviant and non-deviant) at one linguistic level at a time (e.g., syntax, semantics, discourse, etc.). There is no hard-and-fast formula for deciding the order of these levels. For some texts, choices at the semantic level may bear more directly to interpretation while for others it may be the choices at the syntactic or phonetic levels. The linguistic levels which are more directly relevant to interpretation will be considered first, followed by levels which are less directly relevant.

Any act of interpretation, it should be stressed, is a result from the interaction of the reader's schematic knowledge about the world, language and the genre with the actual structural patterns and thematic concerns of the text. Accordingly, the identification of deviant structures, of significant lexical choices and the assigning of interpretive significance are all reader-specific operations. The end product is strictly the analyst's but is nevertheless one which in all probability will be accepted, at least in part, by another analyst carrying out a stylistic analysis of the same texts, provided they share sufficiently similar schematic predications about language, the genre and the world (Widdowson, 1992; Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010). This transparency is a byproduct of the explicitness of descriptive vocabulary and the replicability of analytic procedure.

During the course of the stylistic analysis, I will be using hard linguistic evidence to counter-argue Singh's construction of Indian women. Wherever appropriate, I will bring out the omissions, the inconsistencies and the skewed nature of the evidence Singh used to build an interpretation which offers a favorable construction. In the following section, however, I must situate the critic.

## 3. Analyzing Singh's Interpretation

Prabhat K. Singh is an Indian poet and well-known figure in Indian English literary criticism who has written eight books on criticism. One of them is *A Passage to Shiv K. Kumar: From Agony to Ecstasy*—a critical study of Shiv K Kumar's literary works, published in 2001. Singh reports having met and interviewed Kumar prior to writing the book and that Kumar had given generous and positive response on its content.

Singh has been chosen for three reasons. First, he is a critic on Kumar and has written extensively on him.

Secondly, he claims to be making a “definitive” piece of literary criticism on Kumar in order for the “innocent” reader not to “fall prey to the propaganda of misinterpretation” (Singh, 2001, p. 11), a claim which indeed merits critical attention. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, Singh’s interpretation of the poem is reminiscent of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘claim and quote’, impressionistic interpretive procedure, a procedure which stylistics seeks to substitute with rigorous analyses based on hard linguistic evidence. The present study is a substantiation of this effort.

In the book, Singh places the poem in the background of Kumar’s visit to the USA and contact with American women whose husbands were involved in the Vietnam war. Singh reports that during Kumar’s stay in the USA, he had noticed the impatience and selfishness of the wives and beloveds of American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. They could not wait for the return of their partners. He remarks that this reminded Kumar of Indian women’s fidelity and commitment to their male counterparts. Indian women endured the penance of separation bravely. The poem, therefore, would be a glorification of Indian women’s “integrity, faith and endless but patient waiting” (Singh, 2001, p. 106). Midway through his interpretation Singh makes a contradictory statement. He says the poem is “not a celebration of only Indian women’s virtues but a symbolic glorification of womanhood in general” (Singh, 2001, p. 106). It is hard to reconcile both interpretive remarks. How can the poem be a celebration of the virtues of Indian women as opposed to the lack of faith of American wives and at the same time glorify womanhood in general, of which American women are a part? Is the concern of the poem specific to Indian women or does it extend to embrace all women? In addition, the claim that the poem is a symbolic glorification of womanhood in general is hard to substantiate with linguistic evidence from the text. Singh stretches the images in the poem to suit his positive construction. He makes additions which are hard to sustain and substantiate. He pictures Indian women “gossiping” at the well while the text only says “patiently they sit like empty pitchers”. And instead of “plaiting hope” he argues they are “pleating the strands of their Mississippi long hair” in an attempt to make it a more favorable image. He also misconstrues zodiac doodling on the sands for “contemplating” the Zodiac signs (Singh, 2001, p. 106), aiming at a more positive viewpoint.

Singh bases his positive construction mainly on the image in “plaiting hope in each braid of their mississippi-long hair” in waiting for their men’s return. He excludes the image that compares Indian women to “empty pitchers” from his interpretation. The image of deprivation in the midst of abundance would make it hard for him to sustain his beautiful construction. He also avoids reference to the drying up of eye moisture, because this image would destabilize his construction.

The interpretation also claims that each Indian woman serves as an “ideal metaphor for feminine beauty, chastity, patience, love and trust” (Singh, 2001, p. 107). A careful reading of the poem reveals that reference to patience is coupled with the image of empty pitchers, draining it of any positive connotations. Analysis also reveals that Indian women, sitting like empty pitchers, have lost the moisture in their eyes waiting for their men in a continent triple-baked “in the fires of sun, sex and penury” (Singh, 2001, p. 106). It is hard to uphold the feminine beauty reading in this context.

Singh’s interpretation underlines Indian women’s patience and fidelity but overlooks their marginalization and the centralization of men in rural India. Men are at the center of life in the poem. The construction of Indian women as dependent has also been overlooked. All the activities performed in the poem are indeed intended for men (e.g., the patient sitting and the endless waiting for them). Inclusion of these interpretive remarks would distort the favorable construction.

Last, and surely not least, Singh offers unsubstantiated remarks that there is “a touch of agony” in the poem but “it is not ironical” (Singh, 2001, p. 107). This last comment does indeed dismantle the entire interpretive claim Singh worked hard to construct. The poem does not celebrate Indian women’s ‘patient’ endurance of the penance of separation; it does not glorify Indian women’s absolute commitment to their men; and it does not glorify womanhood in general either. The poem underlines Indian women’s powerlessness and marginalization in rural India. Indian women are silenced – there is not a single female voice in the entire poem. They play marginal roles. This is not only a touch of agony; this is a life in agony.

Singh concludes his interpretation by referring to Kumar’s “mask of an ironic commentator” which he believes Kumar dropped in this poem (Singh, 2001, p. 107), which might, in fact, not be the case, as we will see below.

#### **4. The Stylistic Analysis**

##### *4.1 Interpretive Hypothesis*

My interpretive hypothesis, based on the title and lexical categorization based on semantic content, is that it captures the life of women in Indian villages. Indian women are depicted as being patient, hopeful, chaste, loyal

but dependent on their men. The schema provoked at this stage relates to the life of women in India and the life of women in male-dominated cultures in general.

#### 4.2 Syntactic and Lexical Features

The poem contains three sentences. Every sentence has one independent clause and more than one dependent construction. Analysis of agency in all three independent clauses reveals that Indian women function as agents in all three clauses – once in the form of a noun phrase (line 2) and twice as pronouns referring anaphorically to the noun (lines 4 and 12). All the three references, however, are preceded by dependent constructions. The first one is preceded by a prepositional phrase “in this triple-baked continent”, the second by an adverbial “patiently”, and third by a prepositional phrase “With zodiac doodling on the sands”. In a sense, “Indian women” depend on some other constituent to start the sentences. In fact, the third of these references is even followed by an explicit reference to women’s dependence on their men “waiting for their men’s return”.

Apart from the three independent constructions, this seventeen-line poem contains thirteen dependent constructions (phrases and non-finite clauses). In fact, the poem begins and ends with dependent, subordinate constructions, viz. phrases. This high incidence of dependent constructions serves to heighten the themes of dependence and subordination in the poem, a theme which is totally glossed over in Singh’s interpretation.

Analysis of causation reveals interesting patterns as well. The poem contains a total of eight verbs, six of which have women as their subjects and the remaining two have shadows. Women and shadows are the subjects in the poem. Three of these six verbs are finite and they appear in the independent clauses. In the first main clause, Indian women are associated with not doing [don’t etch]; in the second, they are just sitting [sit]; and in the third, they are doing but doing to themselves [guard their tattooed thighs]. Despite this gradual movement towards agency, Indian women remain inert, at best inactive, throughout.

The other three verbs associated with Indian women are non-finite, viz., present participles. In addition to being embedded at lower levels of structure, these verbs have no objects. In sum, the choice of the six verbs is intriguing. While all these verbs are Material Action Intentional verbs involving action and denoting intention, none of them causes a change of state. The one verb that does “etch” is negated. This transitivity choice undermines Singh’s positive construction and indeed advances a counter construction of Indian women being inactive, dependent and powerless.

The poem has a total of seven pronouns all of which are gender-neutral or non-sexist. Although this is a poem on women, there is not a single gender-specific pronoun (female pronoun). This may be explained by the poet’s choice to speak about ‘women’ in the plural form. Whatever the explanation, the poet is reluctant to use gender-specific, female pronouns in a poem unequivocally on women. There is no female voice in the entire poem; the women are silenced. But although women are referred to in the plural, they always preceded by a qualifying expression limiting their range of reference to “Indian”. This invalidates the ‘feminine’ and generic readings Singh attempts to impose on the poem.

Pronominal references aside, there is only one explicit mention of “women” in the poem (line 2), excluding the title. Men have one explicit mention as well (line 13). This equal weight is unexpected because the poem is on Indian ‘women’. This is interpretively significant. Even in a poem on women, men get almost equal representation. Given the context, it may well be said that women are underrepresented in the poem. But they are pronominally referred to six times. Pronominal references included, women outnumber men but it is men who are in control and who dominate Indian women’s life. All the activities of Indian women are directed towards their men. In light of the analysis of nouns and pronouns in the poem, it becomes difficult to sustain Singh’s ‘complimentary’ reading of the poem celebrating Indian women’s feminine beauty.

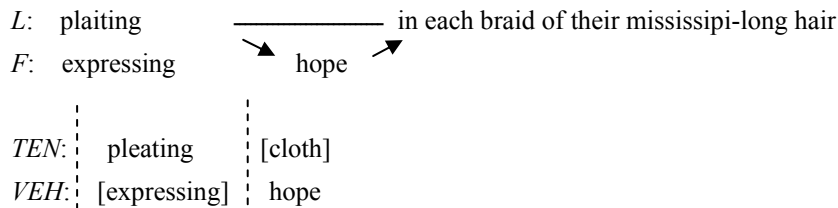
#### 4.3 Semantic Features

The poem begins by setting the scene where Indian women live, a “triple-baked” continent. To bake is to cook by dry heat or to make something become harder by heating it. The latter of these meanings is more compatible with the semantic features of ‘continent’. Three forces, whose identity Singh discloses to be sun, sex and penury, have gathered to harden the Indian continent. This is an appalling description of the setting where Indian women live.

The second image projects Indian women as hopeless and as impotent as the land where they live. They are incapable of anger, to the degree that they do not even sketch impressions of angry eyebrows onto the mud walls of their homes. They seem to take on everything without giving vent to their feelings. They are also compared to “empty pitchers on the mouth of the village well” waiting to be filled. Besides the sensual implication, another ground of this simile is ‘need in the midst of abundance’. There is plenty around but nothing

for them. Incapable, deprived and living on an arid land is a much less glamorous setting than Singh's reading has created.

The next image, perhaps the central image of the poem, is of Indian women "plaiting hope in each braid of their mississippi-long hair". Here is an analysis, following Leech (1969), of the metaphor in the line:



The normal paradigm is 'plaiting cloth' which refers to folds made by doubling the material upon itself. When there is plenty of material, we would fold it upon itself to save it for later use and to make it look better. Indian women's hopes are eternal and have no limit. And here comes in the ironic voice of Kumar, a voice which Singh attempts to cover up in his interpretation. Indian women are also "looking deep into the water's mirror for the moisture in their eyes". They are looking in the village well for the moisture that has dried up in their eyes. They have suffered for too long. The end of the poem marks the end of the day, with the women guarding their tattooed thighs in expectation of their men. This construction reinforces the centrality of men in the Indian village life and the powerlessness of women.

#### 4.4 Phonological Features

Analysis at the level of phonology also reveals interesting patterns. The rhythmic structure of the poem is irregular: no two lines share a metrical make-up. The poem also lacks a regular rhyme scheme and no two lines rhyme either. There is total absence of phonological regularity, an atmosphere consistent with the thematic concerns of the poem. The distribution of stresses is another deviation at the level of phonology. The poem has one hundred and eight syllables: fifty-nine unstressed and forty-nine stressed syllables. This is statistically significant – an unusual ratio of almost 1:1. This heavy concentration of stresses slows down the rhythm and is appropriate for the somber, melancholic mood.

#### 5. Conclusion

My initial reaction to the poem was that it captured the life of women in Indian villages. My interpretive hypothesis was that Indian women were constructed in the poem as patient, chaste, loyal but dependent on their men. Detailed stylistic analysis has substantiated my initial reaction but refined my interpretive hypothesis in a number of ways. Findings from the semantic analysis construct an image of hopelessness and deprivation. Analysis at the levels of syntax and phonology enhance further this negative construction. Women are represented as dependent, inactive, and dominated. Whatever seems to be positive turns out to be ironic. This construction clashes with Singh's purely positive representation of Indian women. The poem is not a glorification of rural Indian women' integrity and faith. It captures the lack of balance in the Indian rural society, with men in the centre and women in the margins.

The uses of stylistics in the literature all share a common concern. They are all concerned with explicating textual meaning and effect by linking them to linguistic choices. This paper shares this concern and has used stylistic analysis to offer a feminist counter-reading to an interpretation by a well-known critic. The construction of Indian women obtained from a stylistic analysis turned out to be much less favorable than the one in Singh's interpretation. It would be interesting to explore this use of stylistics to invalidate interpretive claims on other poems and on fictional and dramatic texts, and perhaps with interpretations of religious documents, political statements and other text types.

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## Appendix

### The Poet

Shiv K Kumar (1921-present) is an Indian novelist, poet, playwright, translator and critic. He has three published novels, six collection of poems, a collection of short stories, a play, a translation of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and several scholarly works to his credit. He taught English literature at Osmania University and Central University of Hyderabad, besides being a Visiting Professor at several American and British universities.

### The Text

#### *Indian Women*

In this triple-baked continent  
women don't etch angry eyebrows  
on mud walls.  
    Patiently they sit  
    like empty pitchers  
    on the mouth of the village well  
plaiting hope in each braid  
of their mississippi-long hair  
looking deep into the water's mirror  
    for the moisture in their eyes.  
    With zodiac doodling on the sands  
    they guard their tattooed thighs  
waiting for their men's return  
till even the shadows  
roll up their contours  
    and are gone  
beyond the hills.