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A Feminist Gaze: The Objectification of Women in Hamid's The Prisoner

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Abstract

*This study examines the objectification of women in *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid through a qualitative, close-reading method. Textual references are interpreted using Nussbaum's framework of objectification, including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, fungibility, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. The analysis reveals that female characters are consistently treated as objects rather than individuals: Naika arranges girls for the police, ward boys reduce women to pleasure, Maqsood Mahr and the Home Minister assign them monetary value, Hassan Ali views them as interchangeable commodities, and both police officers and the brothel madam control their bodies. Salma Begum is depicted as a purchasable commodity, underscoring how women are traded like marketable objects. The study contributes a feminist interpretation by foregrounding women's objectification in the novel and recommends that future research explore the intersection of gender, power, and urban violence in Hamid's works.*

Key Words: Commodity, Feminism, Integrity, Object, Objectification, Subordination, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013/2015) is a compelling novel that foregrounds Karachi's political and criminal complexities capturing state corruption, institutional breakdown, and networks of control through the lens of Akbar Khan, an upright officer ensnared in corrupt systems. Beneath this gripping narrative lies another thread that remains underexamined: the persistent objectification of women. The study argues that representations of women as commodities, tools of exchange, and diminished subjects are not peripheral but central to understanding the novel's depiction of power structures.

Feminist literary criticism offers the conceptual tools to unpack this layered portrayal (Bressler, 2011). Feminism insists on the dismantling of gender-based inequalities and critiques how women are framed in literature and society as static figures relegated to roles of desire, utility, or

passive subordination (Sadia, 2013). The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) defines feminism as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men", succinctly capturing its emancipatory core. Building on foundational feminist thinkers, Simone de Beauvoir (2011) critiqued how women are socially conditioned into object status, while Naomi Wolf (1990) demonstrated how women are trained to "desire to be desired," reinforcing objectification through internalized male gaze. Sally Haslanger (2012) further theorized women as a class marked by sexual objectification, with men as the objectifiers a dynamics mirrored in literary texts engaging systems of power.

For a refined analytic lens, Martha Nussbaum's (1995) taxonomy of objectification comprising instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity distinguishes nuanced routes through which humans are reduced to objects. This framework is particularly productive for studying South Asian literature, where narratives routinely converge gendered violence with political and spatial power (Konde, 2021; Mustafa et al., 2019).

A growing body of scholarly work highlights the connection between urban dynamics and gendered violence in South Asia. Mustafa (2019), in a groundbreaking study, maps the intersection of everyday violence and global 'war on terror' discourse in urban Pakistan, demonstrating how women's mobility and by extension, autonomy is shaped, constrained, and often compromised within militarized, securitized cityscapes. Similarly, Konde (2021) offers a critical literature review of gender violence in South Asia that catalogues how militarisation, socio-cultural norms, and gendered hierarchies perpetuate systemic objectification and harm.

Within Pakistani contexts, feminist activists and scholars like Afiya Shehrbano Zia have advanced rigorous critiques of how women's bodies are regulated, moralised, and politically instrumentalized especially when they assert autonomy or challenge cultural norms (Zia, 2015). Movements such as the Aurat March have further illustrated how women's public presence and slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* ("My Body, My Choice") are viewed not merely as protests but as challenges to patriarchal notions of propriety and female subjectivity (Dawn, 2025). These real-world dynamics resonate with Hamid's fictional portrayal, where women appear as objects "priced", "arranged", or "exhibited" within political-criminal economies.

Critically, prior scholarship on *The Prisoner* has largely overlooked these gendered dimensions. Ahmed (2022) posited a necropolitical reading, conceptualizing Karachi as a "state of exception" where sovereignty is exercised through the regulation of life and death. Zaidi, Saleem, and Aslam (2024) analyzed spatial manipulation through a postmodern Marxist lens, arguing that urban fragmentation reflects capitalist and state marginalization. Ansar, Ali, and Noreen (2025) explored anarchist theory, tracing violence as a governance strategy. While these readings emphasize power and violence, they do not engage with the gendering of violence and the commodification of women's bodies.

This gap in existing criticism reflects a broader silencing in South Asian literary studies, where analyses often foreground nationalism, urbanity, or violence at the expense of gendered analysis (Chakraborty, 2019). Yet feminist literary scholarship cautions that narratives of violence remain incomplete unless they account for the gendered way in which bodies particularly women's are implicated in structural domination (Fraser, 2016).

This study aims to fill this gap by examining how women in *The Prisoner* are systematically objectified, and by demonstrating how Nussbaum's objectification framework elucidates gendered dynamics within the novel's political economy. The research asks: (1) In what ways are women objectified in *The Prisoner*, and which forms of objectification instrumentality, friability, ownership, etc. are most prominent? (2) How does Nussbaum's theory sharpen our understanding of these representations in terms of power, agency, and gendered exploitation? By addressing these questions, this research contributes a feminist lens that complements extant analyses of violence and governance. It highlights how women's objectification is a constitutive feature of the novel's engagement with systemic corruption and control.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study is a qualitative research endeavour. Qualitative research relates to developing explanations of a social phenomenon. It is concerned with the social aspects of the world. Qualitative research makes use of theory which serves as a guideline for analyzing the proposed study. Creswell (2009) "Qualitative inquirers use theory in their studies in several way researchers increasingly use a theoretical lens or perspective in qualitative research, which provides an overall orienting lens for the study of questions of gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalized groups)" (p.49). When the research is made on human behavior, attitudes and experiences, based on observations, analysis and interpretation, the research is said to be qualitative. Kothari (2004) defines that the qualitative research method is especially important in the behavioral sciences where the aim is to discover the underlying motives of human behavior." (p.3). The research process presents a qualitative study in collecting, analysing and understanding the theme of objectification of women in the novel *The Prisoner*.

Similarly, the researchers apply Martha Nussbaum's framework to analyze the objectification of women in the novel *The Prisoner*. Nussbaum, (1996) says "I suggest that in all cases of objectification what is at issue is a question of treating one thing as another: One is treating as an object what is not an object, what is, in fact, a human being. (1995, p.256-257). This theory mentioned above has been applied in the overall analysis of the novel, *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid, to analyze and justify the current study. Furthermore, Close Reading Technique has been used in order to analyze the text *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid. Greenham (2019) defines close reading in the following words: "It is in part an incremental process, but ultimately it is a simultaneous one. As such, this is not a guide that can be 'dipped into'—at least not on a first reading. Rather this guide gradually outlines a holistic methodology for the practice of close reading that begins with your initial intuitive pleasure in reading, then refines this by focusing on individual words (as we've just seen), before moving out to sentences, and then out to paragraphs, stanzas or chapters, then to the whole of a text, finally moving even further out to the concerns of the world: its politics, its history and its contemporary preoccupations" (Anwar et al 2023b; 2019, p.6). Through the Close Reading Technique, the researchers have attempted to interpret and analyze the text to explore a feminist gaze, specifically the objectification of women. The researchers, by using this technique, have studied the text line by line, character by character and their utterances to investigate the issue under study in the text.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

General feminism forms the theoretical framework for the current study. Feminism is a movement that advocates for women's rights and seeks to protect them from exploitation, oppression, and subjugation. The conceptual framework for the current study is based on Martha Nussbaum's framework regarding the notion of women's objectification, which is used to analyse the objectification of women in the novel *The Prisoner*. Nussbaum (1996) says, "I suggest that in all cases of objectification what is at issue is a question of treating: one thing as another. One is treating as an object what is not an object, what is, in fact, a human being. (1995, pp. 256-257). This theoretical framework is utilized in the overall analysis of the novel *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid to support and justify the objectives of the present study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Objectification of women exists everywhere in a patriarchal, male-dominated society. The notion of women's objectification not only exists in the real world but also pervades the literary world. It will be interesting to see what new insights and critical perspectives emerge as awareness of the objectification of women becomes increasingly part of the way we study literature. This demonstrates that the influence of this notion on literature is a fundamental one which no intelligent critic can afford to overlook.

Renowned philosopher and feminist thinker Martha Nussbaum (1995) developed a detailed theoretical model to better understand the phenomenon of objectification how individuals can be treated as if they were mere objects. According to her, there are seven distinct aspects through which a person may be reduced to a "thing" in the eyes of others. These components show the various ways in which human dignity and autonomy may be overlooked. Nussbaum (1995) suggests that the concept of women's objectification encompasses the following notions: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.

Instrumentality

The aspects of instrumentality of Nussbaum (1995) presume that "The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes" (p. 257).

"The ward bosses extorted money, ran gambling dens, carried weapons openly, kidnapped people's daughters "(Hamid, 2013, p.19).

Women are often exploited as tools for profit. This action of kidnapping people's daughters, by the ward bosses, underscores the subordination of women's bodies, reducing them to mere possessions rather than recognizing their autonomy. It highlights a disturbing trend of women's objectification. This exemplifies the instrumentality of Nussbaum's framework of objectification.

"First, the Naika, the chief madam and the most powerful figure in the locality, arranges the girl for you, free of cost." (Hamid, 2013, p.22).

This line illustrates the idea of instrumentality as the words arrange the girl for you free of cost, depicting the girl's body as an object to be provided. Here, free of cost, portrays how the female body is treated as a bonus commodity which is offered for the pleasure of a police officer.

"But you? You are her favorite sub-inspector. You're exempt from all the arse-kissing. I bet she's offered you more pussy than she has to the station in charge" (Hamid, 2013, p. 23).

The above statement of Sub-Inspector Hassan Ali reduces the woman to a sexual object, which aligns with Nussbaum's concept of instrumentality of objectification. It also illustrates the provision of the female body as a reward to a police officer. Furthermore, the sub-inspector says that the Naika is the guarantor of our economic benefits, as it can be seen in the following words of the novel: "After all, she is the guarantor of our economic prosperity" (Hamid, 2013, p.23). Here, the Naika is depicted as a tool for the economic purposes of police officers.

"They raped the girl to their heart's content; we didn't stop them. (Hamid, 2013, pp. 23-24).

This horrific scene in the novel objectifies women as a pleasurable object to be entertained. This statement of Constantine reveals that a girl's body has been treated as an instrument for the satisfaction of males. Thus, this instance exemplifies objectification of a woman and embodies Nussbaum's dimension of instrumentality.

Here is another observation, where Constantine tells Akbar Khan, which reflects Nussbaum's instrumentality aspect of objectification of women, "Look, all these wardia bastards are ayaash. They are all up drinking, gambling, and whoring late into the night." (Hamid, 2013, p. 36) This statement of Constantine illustrates the dimension of objectification as it reflects instrumentality: the women involved in "whoring" are treated as tools for male pleasure. Women are placed on the same level as alcohol and gambling. The presence of women late at night serves no purpose beyond satisfying the desires of the wardia.

In the novel *The Prisoner*, women characters are often treated in terms of monetary value, as words like priciest girls "and, expensive girls clearly reflect this phenomenon. We can see this aspect of objectification in the words of the narrator, "Maqsood Mahr knew that the girls would be expensive, not that the amount was going to come out of his pocket" (Hamid, 2013, p. 47). Thus, the above analysis reveals that women are traded and priced. This exemplifies commodification because the girls are treated as marketable objects.

Denial of Autonomy

Nussbaum (1995) describes the concept of denial of autonomy," The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination. (p.257; Anwar et al., 2022a; 2025c).

Denial of autonomy is a key aspect of objectification, where women are stripped of their will, choices, and overall autonomy. In the novel, there is a scene where the Home Ministers handle matters involving girls. "That was the Home Minister. He wants two of the priciest girls and a suite at a five-star hotel tonight" (Hamid, 2013, p. 46). This remark exemplifies the denial of autonomy because the Home Minister's desires control the entire arrangement, and the girls' autonomy is entirely disregarded.

Another example of denying autonomy can be seen in the conversation between Maqsood Mahr and his subordinate police officer. Their exchange aligns with Nussbaum's idea of objectification: "If you can't get two girls for the night, what good are you...The girls better be good looking. I don't want a complaint from Minister Sahib." (Hamid, 2013, p. 47). If we critically analyze these remarks through Nussbaum's concept of objectification, it's clear that consent, will, and identities are completely absent. They are not seen as individuals with autonomy but as objects to be used. Autonomy is an essential right of every individual. Ateeq Tension infringes this right in the novel as he denies this right by raping the girls without her consent. The mother is seen as just a helpless observer. "Tension had paid regular visits to the house of a slain police officer and

repeatedly raped his young daughter, while the mother was forced to watch." (Hamid, 2013, p. 73). This observation in the novel aligns with Nussbaum's concept of denial of autonomy because the vulnerable women's lives are under the control of Ateeq Tension.

Inertness

The next element is inertness, which, according to Nussbaum (1995), means "The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity. (p. 257). In the novel, this idea of women's objectification appears in the quote "Saala bharwa, I think I'll sort you out along with that other bastard I've just caught." (Hamid, 2013, p. 60). In Sub-Inspector Akbar Khan's remark above, the women, although central to the accusation of "bharwa," are entirely passive and invisible. Women lack movement, voice, and agency. Here, women are discussed implicitly, which aligns with Nussbaum's concept of inertness.

In the novel, another clear example of inertness is the exchange between Akbar Khan and Qari Saif. Akbar Khan tells Qari Saif, "You were a pimp selling women in the bazaars of Peshawar! I wonder how that affects your piety. Or did selling whores somehow give you a greater insight into the ways of God?" (Hamid, 2014, p. 254)

If we critically analyze these lines from the perspective of inertness, the objectified women appear passive and inactive. They are lacking agency because they are sold, acted upon and they have no control over their choices and lives. This scene reflects Nussbaum's concept of inertness, as women are portrayed as being inert.

Fungibility

"Objectifier compares a woman with other objects of the same type, and/or with objects of other types." (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). They had taken her to the ward office. You know their boys are off-limits for us. (Kamran et al., 2022; Kamran et al., 2023a & b; Sadia, 2013, p. 24). The statement of Hassan Ali implies that the girl is considered part of boys' offering, interchangeable and controlled resource. This is a clear depiction of fungibility, where a woman is treated as a commodity. Her identity is shown fungible and managed as part of the boys' asset.

"You think I didn't feel bad for that old man that day? Of course I did. We all have daughters, sisters, and wives. But we stay quiet because we don't want what happened to his daughter to happen to our loved ones. (Hamid, 2013, p. 24)

This passage the fungibility dimension of objectification. Women in *The Prisoner* are viewed fungible. By grouping women as daughters, sisters, and wives in a single breath, the speaker treats them as a class rather than as individuals. This is a hallmark of fungibility the idea that one woman is interchangeable with another in her role. Their individuality is eradicated and only their relationship to men matters greatly.

Another example of fungibility can be seen in the words of the narrator who talks about Constantine's wife. "She had never asked him about his past, about the Naika or the occasional whore over the years." (Hamid, 2013, p. 160) This statement of the narrator (especially the words the occasional whore) demonstrates the notion of fungibility. Furthermore, the absence of names for these women depicts that they are viewed as interchangeable.

Violability

According to Nussbaum(1995), the concept of 'Violability' means that "The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into" (p. 257)

"The old man sat in front of me on the station all day, crying and begging us to go with him, to try and save his daughter from getting gang-raped. We even knew which room of which building they were fucking her in."(Hamid, 2013, p.20) This moment "we know which room" in *The Prisoner* illustrates violability as it shows how her bodily integrity is invaded and disregarded. Her physical and personal boundaries are ignored here.

Another example of violability can be seen in the words of Hassan Ali who says that a girl committed suicide because the ward boys kidnapped and raped her. "The old man came looking for his daughter a couple of days ago. Yesterday the girl committed suicide, and it's caused a bit of a scandal. "(Hamid, 2013, p. 23).Here, her suicide depicts that the ward boys physically and psychologically violate her integrity and well-being. This observation in the novel fits Nussbaum's concept of violability.

In the novel, there is another reference to unnamed industrialist who disgraces the body integrity of an underage girl. "The industrialist who had been caught with an underage girl" (Hamid, 2013, p. 41) .This statement exemplifies what Nussbaum describes violability because the implied sexual exploitation of an underage girl reflects a disregard for her bodily integrity by the industrialist.

Ownership

The notion of ownership involves" The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc." (Nussbaum, 1995, p.257).

"Didn't the Naika arrange a hot date for you?" (Hamid, 2013, p. 22)

In this context, brothel madam and corrupt officers exercise control over women's bodies. They reinforce systems of patriarchal dominance. In the above line, the phrase "arrange a hot date" reduces the woman to a consumable object—someone to be enjoyed and scheduled for male pleasure. This reflects Nussbaum's concept of ownership where women are not seen as autonomous individuals but as property to be arranged. Within the brothel context, the Naika assumes ownership over women by determining their availability and worth. The brothel-mafia nexus thus treats women not as people, but as economic resources.

"I remember, one day I was the duty officer at Preedy Police Station and an old man came into the station, crying that his daughter had been kidnapped by the local UF ward boss ... fancied her. (Hamid, 2013, p.19-20).

The above sentence is critically analyzed, which reflects ownership. Ownership is one of Nussbaum's dimensions of objectification, where a woman's body is treated in a way that can be claimed. Here, the ward boss "fancied her" shows that a woman is reduced into an object of possession. She is treated like a personal property.

"Salma Begum was the talk of all the kothas, and grown men would fight like boys just for the right to pay her any price she demanded."(Hamid, 2013, p. 73).

Salma Begum's body is portrayed as purchasable commodity that men can own by paying to her. She is treated as an object which can be sold. This scene shows Nussbaum's concept of ownership within the framework of objectification.

Denial of Subjectivity

The perspective of denial of subjectivity assumes that "The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account." (Nussbaum, 1995, p.257).

This concept of denial of subjectivity exists in the novel in the following words of the text "I am sure she only does it out of pity for my pathetic career prospects." (Hamid, 2013, p. 23). If we critically examine Constantine's statement above, he denies her subjectivity by attributing Naika's actions to pity. Constantine expresses no interest in her feelings; rather, her emotions are completely ignored. This reflects Nussbaum's idea of denial subjectivity where women are denied of full subjectivity.

There is another scene in the novel that reflects the dimension of objectification as narrator says "In the evening, ladies of the night would come onto the balconies and parade their wares to the gawking customers on the street. Most of the shops masqueraded as music stores but were actually the entrances to the brothels." (Hamid, 2013, p.64). Based on the analysis of objectification, the women are portrayed in terms of their appearance. Their emotions, thoughts, and individuality are absent rather the words "gawking customers" dominate the scene. Women characters are viewed entirely through the eyes of the male customers as commodities rather than full human beings.

"Tension. Apparently, he had fallen in love with a girl from the red-light area. He fawned over her, and was a frequent visitor to her kotha on Napier Road. (Hamid, 2013, p. 73) Based on Nussbaum's concept of objectification, the above passage reflects the idea of denial of subjectivity because Ateeq Tension's actions are emphasized and the girl's experiences, feelings, and thoughts are completely absent in the narrative

CONCLUSION

The researchers analyzed the novel *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid in the light of feminist literary criticism. In the novel, women characters are treated as objects rather than as individuals. In the novel, women are consistently portrayed as objects to be used, controlled, and traded. For example, Naika treats women like objects to be bought and used. Maqsood Mahr, Home Minister, and the brothel madam view women in terms of monetary value. Similarly, the police officers also consider women as things to be used for pleasure. Salma Begum and other girls are traded like marketable objects. The research questions of study have been kept in mind while doing the analysis of the female and male characters' words, utterances and their attitudes towards one another. The analysis of words, utterances and attitudes of women and men depicted the existence of different forms of women's objectification in the novel. This new dimension of feminism has been explored in the light of Nussbaum's framework of objectification in the novel. On the surface, the novel is nothing but a story of crimes, violence, corruption, institutional failure and political victimization but there is a hidden theme which can be found by carefully reading and analyzing characters, events and utterances of males and female characters in the novel. The researchers found out that this practice of objectifying individuals is against all norms

of human civility and content should be appreciated that shows women capable individuals. Thus, the research has explored the theme of women's objectification in the novel *The Prisoner* by Omar Shahid Hamid.

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