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## Defiance to Phallogocentrism in Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable*

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### Abstract

This paper highlights the phallogocentric orientation of post-partition Pakistani society and culture that has perpetually tried to create the illusion of priority and superiority of masculinity over femininity to sustain continued dominance. The phallogocentric gender binarism in Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* is explored and dismantled with the help of various female characters of the novel like Alys Binnat and Qitty Binnat who are seen making their mark in emerging world by working as a teacher and a blogger or columnist deviating from the long held gender codes of behavior. By using the framework of "Phallogocentrism" a neologism in deconstruction theory coined by Jacques Derrida to criticize binary thinking imposed by patriarchal culture, this paper tends to show the defiance on the part of modern women of Pakistan paving their ways from male influential society through the force of education. Education no longer makes them vulnerable to men, the protagonist Alys Binnat being a teacher urges the younger generations to realize that education is more important than seeking a suitable suitor and that they might have a life beyond marriage and children.

**Keywords:** Phallogocentrism, Deconstruction, Unmarriageable, Patriarchal Society

### Introduction

Soniah Kamal is an award winning novelist, essayist and public speaker. Her recent novel, *Unmarriageable*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Townsend Prize for Fiction. Her debut novel, *Isolated Incident*, was a finalist for the KLF French Fiction Prize and the Townsend Prize for Fiction. Her novel *Unmarriageable* depicts how women's subjugation is enrooted in a male dominated society which favours the gender discrimination within society. Hence, the study revolves around the speculation that there are conscious attempts of constructing the stance of defiance to male centralization in a patriarchal society.

This study is based upon the framework inspired from Phallogocentrism which reveals that male centralization ultimately decentralizes female gender in the society, resulting into the discriminatory practices in the society. This theory is an offshoot of Derrida's Deconstruction, while focusing upon the binary opposition as the fundamental construction of Phallogocentrism (Derrida, 1978). Phallogocentrism means the centralization of male gender which determines



meanings of the society and creates social norms. By implying the lens of phallogocentrism in the novel *Unmarriageable* by Soniah Kamal (2019) the paper discusses it as a thoughtful attempt by author to fight against the same stereotypes legalized under the label of institution of marriage of Pakistani society while watering the roots of male's gender idealization as the center and backbone of the society through analyzing the linguistic evidence. As it portrays the inherent obligation for females to be subject to male financially because they are fragile enough to prosper in the fields (profession) which are reigned by male gender.

The protagonist, Alys Binnat and Qitty's construction as well as their ideological propagation is the total representation of combating the stereotyping of male gender prevailing in the culture. Thus, she proves to be the threat to patriarchal culture prevailing in the modern Pakistani society. As Phallogocentrism explicates the linguistic notions which keep the male gender close to phallus and phallus to the center of the society (Hina et al,2016)

### Review of Related Literature

Soniah Kamal's new novel, *Unmarriageable*, is often referred to as "*Pride and Prejudice* in Pakistan" and it is that, certainly. Here Elizabeth Bennet becomes Alys Binnat and Fitzwilliam Darcy becomes Valentine Darsee, which Kamal finds a neat explanation for: "The Darsees descended, Mrs. Binat announced, from *darzees*—tailors—and at some point their tradesmen surname of Darzee had morphed into Darsee, or else, she suggested, squinting, an ancestor must have deliberately changed Darzee into Darsee on official certificates." (Kamal qtd by Masad in an article,2019). This glimpse into the ways names is changed over time in order to elevate social status away from menial labor is especially relevant, since so much of the prejudice that occurs in the book is based on familial ties and class: Slander follows Mrs. Binat about her grandmother being a low-class sex worker; Darsee, of course, is made to seem like a monster who cut Wickam out of the will.

There are many studies which have been devoted to different perspectives. Brenda S.A. Yeoh. (2001) in research article "A Deconstructive Reading of William Golding 's Lord of the Flies for EFL Learners in the Saudi Context" have highlighted the complications which are faced by English as a foreign language learners in Saudi context in comprehending the English language



words and expressions with their nature of being interpreted in a number of ways. This article is focused on the analysis of "Lord of Flies" by William Goldings with the help of Jacques Derrida's "Deconstruction" approach. This novel "lord of Flies" has been analyzed in terms of "Characterization", "Themes" and "textual Structure" in order to investigate the impact of the deconstructive reading on the interpretation of this post-world war piece of literature. The qualitative research methodology has been adopted in this study. It has been observed that with the help of deconstructive reading, students are able to interpret the meaning of text on their own behalf. This kind of reading is helpful in inculcating critical thinking skills and to enhance them. This study is an appreciation of the Derrida's Deconstruction theory in exploring and interpreting the meaning of any literary work.

By applying this deconstructive reading method, the researcher has introduced a new dimension of the mind stream of characters. This new dimension has been achieved by the "Metaphysics of Presence" and its irreversible consequences. Derrida's Deconstruction theory of 1970's was an academic revolt against Structuralism of mid 1960's. According to structuralism, the interpretation of a text is based on metaphysics of presence but Derrida is of the view that a structure can be repeated and it can be subjective intelligence of structuralist. According to Derrida the western tradition gives a great importance to metaphysics of presence in its philosophical and historical form. Julia Kristeva's idea of Intertextually resolves this is matter of presence. Intertextuality as a concept that informs how individual texts are inescapably related to other texts in a "matrix of irreducible plural and provisional meanings"(Mambrol,2016). The term has been used to imply the various ways in which any one literary text is made up of or incorporates other texts. This is done by direct or indirect references and allusions, citations. *Unmarriageable* is a perfect example of Intertextuality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida is taken as the theoretical framework for the present study. Derrida opined that there is a specific approach required in understanding and reading of the text. The text must not be thought of as a defined object. In other words, the text is experienced only in an activity, production or traces of more text (Barthes,1979). Deconstruction liberates the text entirely from the hegemony of an author. For Derrida once, a work has been



written, the text acquires an independent existence. Derrida's deconstruction remains a rigorous form of interrogation, because the 'speaking subject', when he or she speaks, must speak the language of reason. Here the basic method of deconstruction is to find a binary opposition (e.g. speech and/or writing) and show how each term, rather than being the polar opposite of its paired term, is actually part of it. Then the structure or opposition that kept them apart collapses. Ultimately, you cannot tell which is which and the idea of binary opposition loses its meaning or is put into a play (traces of textual meaning). This method is called 'deconstruction' because it is a combination of constructing meaning and deconstructing the metaphysics of presence from the text. The study focuses majorly on the connection between imperialism and the rise of social evils afterwards from the lenses provided by the aforementioned figures. It also spots light on the literary approach of Sonia Kamal regarding the intervention and involvement of colonizers in the internal and external matters of the colonized countries.

"Phallogocentrism" is defined by Jacques Derrida as: 'the system of metaphysical oppositions' (1978: 20) predominant in Western philosophy that has until recently been written by men. Donna Haraway argues that this black/white and divisive logic has produced 'dualisms' that 'have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals'. The examples she offers of these 'troubling dualisms' are 'self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resources, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man'. (ibid) These divides have been *written into* Western culture and it is difficult to conceive of society and culture, or produce knowledge about the phenomenon of the world, without the use of them.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

By keeping in view Derridean concept of Phallogocentrism, those aspects from the novel are studied and presented that highlight how the phallus can be moved from the centre

### **Questioning the financial dependency as an agent of Phallogocentrism**

Within the course of the novel, Alys is found to be preaching the financial independency of women. As the novel opens up, she is found imparting the same notions which defies the ground of patriarchal upbringings in the Pakistani society, where a female is supposed to get married or associated to a male gender so that she can elevate her status financially. The comments on her



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student's rewriting of the initial statement of *Pride and Prejudice* according to which the financial security of a woman is embedded with her marriage, has been stated below as an example of the same context: "But how about the daughter earn a *good* income of her own and secure this freedom for herself?" (Kamal, 2019, p. 12).

Hence, the sense of freedom and independence is being inculcated into the students who have the ability to radicalize the future of the Pakistani patriarchal society. The character of Alys is more inclined towards imparting the sense of opting profession in her students instead of simply being Mrs and then mothers which also liberates the students (coming generation) from worshipping the phallus as a center of society. As her encounter with her student Tahira reveals that she is not much pleased by the fact that her student is engaged at such an early age, that she is immature enough to decide about the person she is up to getting married is intellectually marriageable or not. Alys discourages the fact that her mother has made her prioritize her engagement ring (token of financial security) upon her books (token of her awareness). Hence, the contemporary society which surrounds Alys is more up to negating any kind of awareness which would defy all the supportive notions which make women financially reliant. Her views related to liberation of women in financial terms are:

Yet it always upset her that young brilliant minds, instead of exploring the universe, were busy chiselling themselves to fit into the moulds of Mrs and Mum. It wasn't that she was averse to Mrs Mum, only that none of the girls seemed to have ever considered travelling the world by themselves, let alone been encouraged to do so, or to shatter a glass ceiling, or laugh like a madwoman in public without a care for how it looked. At some point over the years, she'd made it her job to inject (or as some, like Rose-Nama's mother, would say, 'infect') her students with possibility. And even if the girls in this small sleepy town refused to wake up, wasn't it her duty to try?. (Kamal, 2019, p. 13).

As the above stated excerpt also shows the resistance of the society upon the views of the Alys, as is discouraged as well as continuously bashed for propagating the controversial norms which society does not support. Thus, she is found to be guilty upon her preaching as acts. In addition to this when Sherry gets married she negotiated with her husband that he should allow his wife to earn money by selling her voice recording while reciting Quran e Pak. Mr. Kaleen protests



against this as financial independence is not for women as it is not backed by the society as well as his ego. To dismantle Phallogocentric ways of functioning it becomes imperative on women to break away from such economic dependence which maintains the status of the men as the center of power.

### **Protesting the Objectification of Women**

In addition to the above stated notions, the female character, Alys Binnat, is also found confounding disregarding all the practices which reinforces the objectification of women in front of men, while considering manliness as the center of worship for society. In novel, there are many instances which conforms to the upper stated proposition. For example, in class, the students suggest her to go for routine makeover so that she could be liked by someone (male) in a pretext of getting married to the richer person. As it is stated in the text that: 'But why not!' several distressed voices cried out. "You're not *that* old. And, if you grow your hair long again and start using bright lipstick, you will be so pret" (Kamal, 2019, p. 16).

Hence, these views of the students are the signs of the societal reinforcements for women objectification. On the other hand, within the same course of the story, Alys is found negating such types of views which emphasizing upon the proposition that women is not submissive enough to doll up for men, who is not equal to her. Thus, she does not consider anyone equivalent to anyone and vice versa.

Likewise, there are many instances in the novel, in which Mrs. Binnat orders her daughter to pay special consideration towards their attire while in any marriage ceremony, so that they could get liked by some eligible bachelor (Richer persons). But, in contradiction to this proposition as well as practices, Alys sets the trend of paying special consideration towards the intellectual growth than on the outlooks. Therefore, she dresses up as she want to be but not like what society wants her to be. In a nutshell, Alys defies all those prevailing practices as well as norms of the society, which subjugates women in front of men in the terms of financial gains. Moreover, Mrs. Binnat outsidies own daughters when they are not looking their best or looking tanner than their original color. Hence, she conforms that a women should look as appealing to men as she could so that she can be ranked as marriageable by them as well as society but in contrast to her mother views, Alys thinks that owning your own physical appearance is the biggest favor a girl



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can give to herself. Therefore, she appears in her own casual looks in the events. As she says: “but that doesn’t change the fact that looks are not the be-all and end-all, no matter what our mother says” (Kamal, 2019, p. 23).

Besides, getting good outturn as well as making oneself up, Alys also combats against the oppression of the women in the terms of searching a perfect match for marriage. For instance, Sherry explains all those incidents of her life in which she lost the proposals due to the reasons that the boy had found a replacement of Sherry in Germany as the girl would help him in career. Alys consoles her that it is better to not engaged in such a poisonous relation and staying single and unmarried for such causes is far better. All these instances are signs which signify all those societal practices which are faulty in nature as they decentralize women to stay submissive to males. And due to this decentralization of females by the society, she is easy to be blamed as ill omen (as Sherry was blamed so) or labelled as divorcee (as Alys points it out that women’s marital or sexual status is more important than men’s).

Furthermore, Alys also backs Darsee that he did not act like conventional men of the society and make his mother and sister a subject to violence when he reveals that he had no objections when his mother got married or her sister was in illegal relationship with Wickham in her young age and conceives his baby. Instead, he becomes a backbone for her sister and help her to cater the situation and conceals her secret from the society.

In addition to this, another instance can also be taken as the protest of Alys against the objectification of women. On the first encounter of Alys and Darsee, she overhears him saying not so appropriate things regarding her while labelling her as not marriageable material for him.

After this event, she did not consider giving him any type of attention, unlike the other girls of the contemporary society who would show interest in a person while trying to get married to him by hook or by crook. Hence, her this deviation from society also ensures that during the course of novel she is protesting against the phallus centralization and women decentralization, where a women is also supposed to meet the societal measure/yardstick to becoming or being eligible for marriage by male figures.

Moreover, while proposing to Sherry, Mr. Kaleen links her to a dog, as a dog is thought to be submissive as well as obedient for its own. Likewise, his future wife should be submissive and





obedient to his orders. These things are later observed by Alys, when she visits them for this reason, Alys was not in support of this marriage but ultimately she was happy as her friend was happy with this marriage. Besides, she did not accept the proposal of Mr. Kaleen because she does not like the fact that her uncle was proposing her to marry him just because he wants someone to overlook his children as his wife was dead. But Sherry was already convinced to beseech any compensation for her non-ability to procreate which she found in the form of Mr. Kaleen who was wealthy and did not want children from his future wife. Hence, women are prone to compromising upon aspects that are not socially acceptable.

As it is mentioned above that the Mrs. Binnat is a strong representative of the stereotypical patriarchal society which assigns power to all social constructions of male gender. Therefore, she and her most favourite daughter, Lady, is in a habit of making Qitty conscious of her obesity as a dimmed aspect of her personality, as it is not a trait that aligns itself with accepted beauty standards nor make her a strong candidate. As her mother says on the occasion of sending her to the event that: “Qitty, lose five pounds and you will feel much better. Qitty glared at her mother. She hadn’t had a single samosa so far, but now she popped one whole into her mouth” (Kamal, 2019, p. 39).

Thus, the character construction of Qitty proves to be a strong dejection for patriarchal culture of the society in which the text is contextualized. Hence some of the examples have been stated below which denies the acceptance of objectification of women by Qitty.

The readers can observe the character of Qitty as most invulnerable as she is portrayed unaffected by the comments which she usually receives on her personality due to her obesity. The most redeeming aspect of this character is unraveled whenever Lady degrades her in front of everyone to make fun of her, but she defends herself and stays same without conceiving any inferiority complex. For example, as her mother keeps insisting on losing the weight by saying that: “Please, Qitty, for my sake try to lose some weight before Nadir Fiede. No one wants to marry a fat girl” (Kamal, 2019, p. 40). She assures her mother that she can never be the reason of the disgrace of family but Lady can be as she is flattered upon having the attention of all the sought after men. Likewise, her mother, Mrs. Binnat is in habit of considering her own daughter as commodity to overcome the degradation by Mr. Binnat’s brother, by marrying them in higher





strata of the society. Hence, she is usually found in an attempt of proving her daughters worthy of getting married and procreate the children as it is apparent from the following comment on Qitty: “Not to worry! Even Qitty’s womb is in tip-top shape; all she needs is a bit of dieting” (Kamal, 2019, p. 102).

Besides this, there are many other instances, which explicate the resistance in Qitty for accepting herself as a conventionally approved marriageable material by disobeying her mother’s order to have a balanced diet and lose weight. Hence, these instances prove that there is a presence of a constant negotiation on the part of the character of Qitty with the society upon the decentralization leading into the commodification and objectification of the female gender for the mean causes of phallus to be the center and holding determinateness.

Moreover, as the novel opens up, the readers are conveyed about the interest of Qitty, which is to become a journalist or cartoonist. This shows the radicalized views and enthusiasm in Qitty. But initially her father did not allow her. Hence, she suppresses her desires because of the authoritative decision by her father taken on the behalf of her. But still, she continues sketching but keeps them with herself only.

### **Alys’ Attempt to Reconstruct Female Subjectivity**

Since patriarchal societies are phallogocentric it is natural that women are pushed to the margins and considered socially and intellectually inferior hence leading to the continued decentralization of women. Alys is portrayed as a heroine who has intellectual power to think and convince herself. During her first encounter with Darsee, he leads down her upon her reading list which was Reader’s digest and Good Housekeeping. But later on, her reading list overtakes Darsee’s list which makes him overwhelmed which is evident from his comment: “I see you read more than *Reader’s Digest* and *Good Housekeeping*,’ Darsee said” (Kamal, 2019, p. 107).

Hence, Alys breaks the stereotype where women is supposed to have restricting reading list and is not considered as well-read. Therefore, she is intellectually thought to be inferior to men. Besides this, Alys is most favorite of her father, due to her intellect. As the story unfolds that he favours her thoughts on being liberal yet defying all the stereotypical notions engrossing phallus centering in the Pakistani society.



While discussing about the intellectual prospective of Qitty unfolded through her immense concerns towards learning about the marginalized women (women who are outsized and looked as Other by other women, as they are not able to fulfill the criteria of being marriageable). Hence, Qitty is inclined towards the representation as well as on the exploration of marginalized women in the magazines as Alys says to her: “I’ve brought you a bundle of used magazines I found, called *Mode*, for plus-size women” (Kamal, 2019, p. 225).

So, the character of Qitty is another source of modern technique challenging the status quo of the society as well as the norms which are made to elucidate male gender as pious and elevated one. Another instance that depicts the fight of the marginalized females fought by Qitty is when she comments on closing down of her favourite magazine, which used to publish obese models, as: “*Top designers only wanted to design for skeletons. Their Loss. Fat Stocky Short Squat Women Are Here. We Exist. We Are Visible*” (Kamal, 2019, p. 284).

By adding another inference into the same assertion it can be stated that Qitty was proposed by a person at the wedding of her sisters, who wanted her to change and be like his desire (slim and smart). She rejected the proposal by saying that: “*Daffaho*, get lost. If I’m happy loving myself just the way I am, then who are you to put conditions on accepting and loving me?” (Kamal, 2019, p. 289).

In spite of receiving much unbearable criticism, Qitty is found to be indulging into the activity which engrosses women empowerment in patriarchal society, as she engraves the liberal quotes on the shirts of her sister’s shirt, for example: “Alys was wearing white linen trousers and a black T-shirt saying NOT YOUR AVERAGE AUNTY. ‘Thanks. My sister Qitty makes these for fun” (Kamal, 2019, p. 240).

Thus, she gives an expression to her rage which has been restored by the society as well as her own mother and sister Lady through constant criticism and attempts to urge her to change at the end of the novel, when she writes all about her suffering of being marginalized by male dominated society which expects her to conform to their standards by saying:

She’d sent her words to a national newspaper: she was not just fat; she was fat and intelligent, fat and funny, fat and kind, fat and fun, fat and beautiful, fat and a good friend,



fat and creative, fat plus every lovely attribute in the world. She was fat and happy and did not care about being thin – imagine that. (Kamal, 2019, pp. 289-290)

Hence, Qitty authoritative holds a position to write as a columnist of a newspaper to write and voice the concerns of the marginalized and decentralized women who have equal rights to live their life as the centralized male have.

### Conclusion

In conclusion it can be stated that novel knits the plot while okaying a special heed towards the fruitful attempts of defiance to phallogocentrism, mainly through Alys, the protagonist of the novel, as well as through her sister Qitty, who is a victim of body shaming coming from her own family as well as from the society but gradually her aspirations to become an artist make her flourish, and give her the confidence to voice her concerns and protest against the faulty practices of the society. Likewise, the discussion extracted from the instances of Alys retaliation against the male dominated social world expresses her wise endeavors to enact and highlight the societal need to enlighten the young females who are continuously made to be submissiveness and subjugated in front of phallogocentrism.

While considering both characters as the mouthpiece of the narrator, it can be further concluded that the narrator has opted these both character as the tool to construct a stance against phallogocentrism by spreading the words of awareness among the readership of emerging and radicalized modern era.



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