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**Women's Struggle for Emancipation: A Feministic Study of Uzma Aslam Khan's  
*Trespassing***

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**Abstract:**

*Women and their suffering have been a matter of concern for many female Pakistani and diaspora writers. Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* is a fine example of feminist literature. This paper explores the portrayal of female characters in Khan's work. It examines the struggle of female characters and their endeavour to rise head and shoulders above the patriarchy. The paper, drawing insight from the key concepts of Rosemarie Tong, a liberal feminist, delves into the issues of patriarchy and the suffering of women. Moreover, it is an attempt to identify and outline the effects of culture on the characters, particularly the female characters, in a male-dominated society. The impact of culture in the making and unmaking of characters is quite evident because the action of *Trespassing* frequently shifts across the seas. The paper argues that the female characters in the novel face multiple shackles imposed by their male counterparts. The female characters struggle against inequality at home and in the workplace. The study finds that it is through the achievement of economic independence that the female characters attain equality, honour, and prestige.*

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**Key words:** Diaspora, Female entrepreneur, feminism, Pakistani fiction

## **Introduction**

The suffering of women is not a new issue today. If we go back in history, and even in ancient history, women were treated as second-rate citizens in society; however, this discriminatory attitude of man-made society has been termed gender discrimination or gender inequality. Women's deprivation starts in the very house where they are born, a male child is given preference over a female child, be it food, clothes, or other facilities, so it can be said that the sufferings of women and discrimination begins in her home. She is deprived of the basic facilities such as education, and she must live within the boundaries drawn by society, family, father, brother, and even by her sons. Manu, in his writings known as Law of Manu, describes the status of women as "In her childhood, a girl should be under the will of her father in her youth, of her husband, her husband being dead, of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will" (Muller, 23).

The ancient societies are known for male domination, masculinity, and patriarchy. Women subsume to men as man is the icon of mankind. The religious texts, laws of the government, and other documents, including poetry and literature, bear vivid evidence of the discrimination against women and their subjugation. As societies progressed, there have been different movements for the emancipation of women. However, the leading movement of feminism gained momentum only in the twentieth century. Uzma Aslam Khan, a novelist from Pakistan, settled abroad, tries to highlight the plight of women in her text. She presents a world which is in conflict perennially between the opposing forces.

Trespassing is a story of subcontinent culture, traditions and society, motherhood, love, and corruption and long tales of having very cordial relations. The novel reflects the attitude of males towards females, always thinking themselves superior. Trespassing has many plots and subplots covering a story of the unhappy Daanish and Dia, Riffat and Annu, women of different generations, thus having different perceptions about religion, culture and society. The novel focuses on the positive and negative aspects of society and covers the life of a businessman to a villager. It gives an impression of life in Pakistan.

Trespassing covers many facets of the Pakistani women as reflected in her novel, and she is conscious of the absence of the Pakistani women's voice in her own field. Trespassing offers a detailed education on the life of a silkworm, which is reflected in Khan's absorbing tale of Pakistan. She weaves the tales of several women. Riffat is a successful businesswoman and a pioneer of silk production, whose ambition has cost her dearly. Anu, who never got the care from her husband, her hope and focus was her only son, Daanish. Nisrin, who was brought up in London, yet believed in Eastern Culture and traditions of arranged marriages. Sumbul is a young woman, but the mother of four, married to a man in his forties. Khan's characters in her writing are victims, survivors and everything in between, totally caught up in the conflicts of universal implications of culture, traditions, place and demography.

The novel tells us about the interwoven lives of people belonging to the First and Third Worlds, Pakistan and the United States, the upper and lower classes and the older and younger generations, etc. This shows that Pakistani women's struggle against the political and religious system is hidden, but very active within the social system of Pakistan. In Pakistan, freedom from the cruel social system is not easy, even if women have achieved a certain level of education. Therefore, the legal equality of women is crushed mostly by dictators. Women are often the first ones to be victimized. Such a scenario curtailed their rights, freedom and equality in society.

The current study is based on liberal feminism, and the insight of liberal feminism has been taken from the feminist ideas of Rosemarie Tong. Feminism is described as a theory

of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. It began as an organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Feminism is the basic feature of Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing*. The characters in the novel are the victims of society's crimes against women. In this research, a detailed analysis of the issues of oppression of women by men and, more interestingly, oppression of women by other women will be highlighted. The thesis aims to uncover the picture of American and Pakistani women as presented in the novel *Trespassing*. Moreover, the thesis will explore the role and struggle of the female characters as they are presented in the novel.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a qualitative research design to interpret the text, considering liberal feminism as propounded by Rosemarie Tong. It critically analyses the text to explore the struggle of the female characters to rise and live with honor in a male-dominated world.

### **Theoretical framework**

From the canon of feminism, the study draws on insights from the concepts of liberal feminism. Rosemarie Tong asserts that liberal feminism upholds the belief that men and women are inherently and fundamentally equal because both are rational individuals; therefore, both sexes should enjoy equal rights. Legal, educational, economic, and political domains should be equally open to both genders, with no restrictions placed on women." Tong (63, 34, & 55) argues that the inequality between men and women stems from unequal access to the available opportunities. However, women can gain freedom and get rid of oppression if they take control of their economic resources and become financially independent. Through reform rather than revolution, these goals can be achieved, enabling women to enjoy equality within society. For that purpose, there should be full participation of women in every sphere of life; they should be the producers instead of merely consumers. The study makes use of these ideas and traces the struggle of women and their economic independence to achieve equality. It is through their participation in economic activities that they secure justice and equality for themselves.

### **Discussion**

The text moves round the life struggle of female characters from dependence to independence.

### **Role of economic activity**

Women across the world face discrimination. Economic activities ensure human sustenance. Man is traditionally believed to be the primary breadwinner, and the woman only a householder. Because of this belief, men have always dominated women. If women keep themselves away from economic matters and activities, they cannot gain equality (Friedan, 11). The women walked a long and arduous path to gain suffrage; they faced all the hardships imagined by the dominant government officials. They were paid low in the corporations. They didn't have equal pay to the men. The middle class first left their homes and worked in the markets. Their economic independence later brought them to equal pay in the workplace.

Economic activity accounts for actions that involve the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services at all levels within a society; it includes producing, buying, or selling products or services. Long centuries of human civilization tell us that man has been the representative of humanity, and woman subsumed in it. Historically, only producers regulate and manipulate the lives of others. In contrast, over the last century, the condition and place of women have radically taken a new shape. Feminist movements substantially empowered women across the globe. Now women enjoy more freedom and equality, and it is chiefly because of their participation in and contribution to economic

activities (Rosemarie 119). Now they are running businesses. They are now the producers. Betty Friedan discovered a strange thing, interviewing women of her own generation over the past many years, when she was growing up, many of the women could not see themselves beyond the age of twenty-one. They had no image of their own future, of themselves as women. Most of the women did not have their identity (Friedan, 62).

Small businesses can enable women to stand on their feet; hence, entrepreneurship has a vast scope for women to be part of economic activity and lead from the front instead of being dependent on their males. When women depend upon their male members of the family, they cannot exercise their free will. Moreover, they are supposed to obey instead of an active participant in the decision-making process. The role of Women entrepreneurs in economic development is inevitable (Rosemarie 56). The world has changed, and so are the means of production and strings of economy. The days are gone when ladies would sit at home and just raise children. Now, avenues of earning in the sectors of services and goods are open to both men and women. In the novel *Trespassing*, the female characters strengthen themselves through economic activities. They are regulating their lives according to their own terms. Riffat is one such woman. I shall highlight the role of culture and economic activities in this chapter. Before that, I would highlight the features of culture. Culture is a multi-meaning word: many things to many people.

The female character engaged in economic activity and liberal thoughts is Riffat. Riffat is a reviver of organic dyes, a nurturer of silkworms and a decisive entrepreneur who chooses to marry out of obligation rather than love. She had been in the UK and witnessed many rallies in the 1960s in London. "She had been a part of the rallies in the 60s in London, so her thoughts were taking her back there after all" (Khan, 41). She returned to Pakistan with Shafqat to make a better future after having listened to a speaker in a rally, who gave accounts of American atrocities at a war crisis tribunal: "until we own our own resources, we will never be free, As long as the west keeps stealing the forests and minerals of the south and the east we will fight" (Khan, 46)

Riffat is an enlightened and up-to-date mother. Her daughter Dia is very attached to her. She imparted all the qualities of a liberal woman to her daughter. Both women have gone for business. When the novel opens, the reader finds that Riffat, like Annu, is a widow. She is living with her daughter and running the business of her dead husband successfully. In this context, Rosemarie (187) describes that women are not idle in any way, but they are kept idle by their male family members. In the corporations, in world democracies, the opportunities are available to them where they can learn, grow, and excel economically. They can opt different professions and gain middle and high positions in the corporate sector.

Apart from this, the most emancipated American women do not have a very ideal kind of equality of opportunities. We always compare the east with the west. Riffat is part of the east as well as of the west. But the western woman has always struggled for equal rights. And among all the western women, the American women are at the top. Caiazza, Shaw, and Werschkul (4) argue that women across the world, specifically, in the western world are taking big strides of progress because they have come to know about their rights and rightful place in society. However, still there is a long way to go, still there is a lot more to achieve, even, in the world's most advanced country the USA women are not equal to men in every respect. There are many challenges for women in the world of business.

Moreover, women are often believed that they cannot enter the world of business, and it is less likely for them to shoulder the responsibility of livelihood. Introducing the idea of gender disrupts conventional assumptions about rationality and questions whether women can fairly

as “emotional” economic agents in contrast to supposedly “rational” men. If markets are understood as rational systems, then their claimed neutrality becomes doubtful. Feminist economists and philosophers challenge these assumptions by examining women’s actual capacities and rejecting the widespread belief—in both Western and non-Western cultures—that women are inherently emotional, that emotion is feminized, and that it stands in opposition to reason. Martha Nussbaum persuasively argues that women’s emotions are not the result of innate nature, but rather stem from the social conditions shaping their lives (Laurence et al, 4).

Riffat Mansoor immerses herself so much in the economic activity that she herself becomes a socially isolated woman. The effect of economic activity is much stronger on her, so much so that she can barely manage to take part in the family gatherings, social circles and many more. She cannot properly attend to phone calls and never returns phone calls. “...weddings unattended, deaths only hastily condoled” (Khan, 412)

Khan’s *Trespassing* is a novel that shows women struggling and striving in a society that has been shaped chiefly by men; these women find it rather difficult to establish their independent, separate identity. In the very first chapter, Khan glorifies women by giving an example of a Chinese queen. “...for many months, Emperor Huang-ti had noticed the mulberry bushes in his luscious garden steadily losing their leaves. His bride, His-Ling-Shih, was asked to investigate. She noticed little insects crawling about the bushes and found several small white pellets. Taking a pellet with her to the palace, with nothing but instinct, she ventured to the best place to put it: in a tub of boiling water. Almost at once, a mesh of curious fine thread separated itself from the soft ball. The empress gently pulled the thread. It was half a mile long. She wove it into a royal robe for her husband. The first silk item in history” (Khan, 10).

*Trespassing* by Uzma Aslam Khan deals with business-class men and women. It also paints a dreary picture of identity crises. Further, it deals with female characters who are trying to find their rightful place and identity in Pakistani society through economic activities. There is no greater power in the world than the power of the economy. A strong economy makes you a strong person, and consequently, you become a mover and a shaker of humanity. The canvas on which Uzma Aslam Khan paints the picture of *Trespassing* is not even but odd at certain points. She contrasts eastern and western women, and she highlights the power structures, discrimination and gender bias. The whole book by Uzma Aslam Khan depicts the dilemma of the characters who are oscillating in the air of culture and economic activities. Economic activities and culture are the controlling forces that regulate the lives of the characters in the novel. Uzma Aslam Khan also presents the other side of the story, which is based on struggle and hard work. She empowers the female characters by making them somehow independent of men, the typical men who love to subjugate women in all respects.

For that purpose, these characters trespass the boundaries of culture and economic struggle and liberate themselves through their own efforts. All of them yearn and strive for equality- the equality of women with men. It is not surprising to see that nearly every woman in the novel has uplifted herself with her own hands. Friedan (326) observes that living through others is far easier than developing a complete and independent sense of self. For someone unaccustomed to autonomy, the freedom to design and direct one’s own life can be deeply unsettling. A woman may eventually come to recognize that the only real answer to the question “Who am I?” lies within her own inner voice. She might spend years in therapy trying to resolve her “adjustment to the feminine role” or her perceived obstacles to being a “fulfilled” wife and mother yet still feel that something is missing. Even the most skilled psychoanalyst can only encourage her to trust that inner voice. In a society that demands so little from women, each woman must rely on her internal sense of self to discover her identity in a rapidly changing world. She must construct a new life plan,

shaped by her own needs and talents, one that incorporates love, children, and home—traditional markers of femininity— while also allowing her to pursue meaningful work and contribute to the future.

Anu is the mother of Daanish and one of the leading characters in the novel. Her marriage was not based on love, but it was a matter of arrangement. “Anu was twenty-three, married at sixteen, educated only till class nine” (Khan, 72). She was born and raised in a very conservative family. Her early life is just like the life of millions of Pakistani women who suffer at the hands of their male family members. In a very traditional setting, she was married to a man when she could barely think of right and wrong. Only at the age of sixteen was she given into marriage to a man who could barely understand her. It appears as if she was a burden on her father or family. She could not afford to live without obeying her family. She was only a woman and could not question the decisions that were made by her family. Her primary right, granted to every woman by religion, is easily usurped by the fathers. This rigidity and hypocrisy of the males and the social constructions made by these male members of the society are questioned and challenged in ‘Trespassing’. What better approach to life can be expected from a woman who is not an educated one? An uneducated person is usually a lost person, but Uzma Aslam Khan has remarkably set the female characters in the novel, raising them and constructing them. *Trespassing* is a fine example of women's emancipation and women's liberation. Annu, the mother of Daanish and the wife of the doctor, struggles much to lead her family. Her husband dies after sixteen long years of marriage. As a young girl, she is deprived of education. She is educated only till class nine. But Annu utilises her talent and learns the English language, which is a mark of respect in upper classes in Pakistan, but her accent is not up to the standard.

### **Role of Culture**

Human beings are cultural beings and based on culture humans are different from other species. It is a unique property of human life that we live in a society which collectively agrees on certain norms, customs, and trends which constitute the totality of culture. No two cultures are same; however, they can have similarities. Moreover, some cultures are narrow and have strict code of conduct for women. Contrary to this there are cultures which offer maximum opportunities to their participants particularly the female ones. Our behavior is governed by the principles set and established by the culture we live in. Unfortunately, still in many cultures in the world do not ensure equal rights and position to women rather their plight is determined by men. For them, the fact that humans are animals is simply irrelevant in the study of human cultural behavior. We intend to deal with this subject below.

The study explains and discusses the idea that cultural identities are not fixed but have histories and undergo transformation in relation to race and ethnicity. The study focuses on ethnicity and race as categories of cultural identity. Indeed, it is the examination of the degrees of race and ethnicity in terms of identity that imparts the cultural studies method. Man is not the sole representative of humanity. A woman is also human. The identities and status of men and women are culturally constructed, not God-given, immutable, ‘natural’ facts. Women and their place in society, and then later being exposed to Western research with its diverse philosophical and ideological roots, the conception of what ‘being a woman’ means has changed drastically and is still changing. It has shifted from a firm belief that men and women are biologically inclined to speak, act, and feel in a certain way to the realization that gender is a social category which is enacted and performed at any given time.

Khan, therefore, presents a subtle contrast between eastern and western women and their attitudes towards life. Danish, while living in America, forgets his Islamic and Pakistani roots

he suffers from an identity crisis. While his American girl friends are absolutely clear in their approach to life. It is culture which regulates human conduct. It has a deeper impact on human life. Although culture is a very relative term, yet people from different cultural backgrounds act mostly according to their culture. Here, the character of Becky is worth mentioning. In the first place, she is a woman, and she is expected to act like a woman. But we must not ignore his trespassing attitude.

Becky is an American girl, and she is living among people with different ethnic backgrounds, and Daanish is one of those. She is a foil to any of her eastern or, more specifically, Pakistani counterparts; would it be Dia or Nisrin or any other except Rani. Uzma Aslam Khan has shown that Western women have liberated themselves from many social constructions, and they freely trespass the imposed boundaries. In the case of Becky, Khan writes about a meeting between Daanish and Becky in Becky's room. "Two days later, she invited him to her room. It was littered with books like *The Women Warrior*, *Sexuality and American Literature* and *sexuality, and Intercourse*" (Khan, 31).

It doesn't necessarily mean that American women are more frustrated. In the very next move of the scene, the author shows the sexual frustration of an Eastern man who is under the spell of suppression. When Daanish visits Becky's room, he observes many magazines that contain sexual content. In her room, he finds a collection of magazines containing nudity contents, and he also finds books on feminism. In Becky's room, although he is nineteen, he feels ninety. Therefore, he is in search of a chance when he could break the boundaries of his virginity. "In general, he let her talk, waiting eagerly for the day their kisses would culminate in more." (Khan, 32).

It is a subtle contrast that Uzma Aslam Khan presents between the East and the West. This kind of liberal life, which American women are enjoying and exercising in the West, is presented by the author as a contrast to the life of Pakistani women. Uzma Aslam Khan further strengthens these views in another episode. The author, in very clear terms, highlights the cultural differences between the Pakistani and American people. She delineates the facts that Pakistani people settled in America suffer manifold. They suffer from cross-cultural dilemmas and identities. They are always confused about every move they make and every step they take. They cannot think and decide which side they must go on and which side they must abstain from. In the third chapter of the book, the author narrates an encounter between Becky and Daanish. It is not much surprising to see the liberty that Becky enjoys as an American woman and the amount of shame that Daanish suffers from by living in America as a Pakistani. The title of the third chapter is "Choice"; this chapter reveals the above-mentioned situation. It goes, "He was mortified. She sat up, fingered his penis till it grew stiff again, and encouraged him to listen to his body. "What does it say?" she whispered...let it happen, she encouraged. "Don't hold back". She prepared to lie down with him again, but it was too late. His semen sprayed her knees. The forest shook with mirth, dropping yet more leaves" (Khan, 36).

By the end of this scene, Daanish is found in utter despair. In the above quote, the author has used the word 'Mirth', which is quite significant in this context. Till the time the reader finishes the chapter 'Choice', he ponders that the word 'mirth' has been specifically used for Becky because she is the one in this whole act who doesn't feel any undue burden on her heart. For her, it was just normal practice. Becky, being an American, is free from the dilemma of identity crises. She knows precisely who she is and what she is doing. She doesn't have any mental confusion, or is she being led by any man? She is exercising her free will and living right according to her aspirations without taking imposed conventions into consideration. She is an embodiment of liberty as she is not under any outer influence.

## **Conclusion**

Tresspassing of Uzma Aslam Khan takes the reader into different social groups, ideas and cultures of the world. The writer discusses the Asian culture and the Western culture, and the way Americans view people from other societies. The contrast among the continents is evident in the novel. Daanish faces the stifling demands of family in Pakistan and simultaneously encountering subtle forms of cultural oppression in America. Khan also discusses the Silk Farms of Dia's mother and the cosmopolitan city of Karachi. Tresspassing portrays the lives of Salaamat, as well as Dia. Khan talks about the culture of the UK and the USA, and also covers the striking streets of Karachi. Tresspassing is a story of cultural and ethnic differences and countries and covers the global conflicts as well as personal concerns. The female characters are more individual than the male characters in the novel. There is an ongoing struggle between them; the female characters make the best of the available opportunities, specifically, the economic ones, and exploit them best in their best interest. It is their economic independence which ensures them freedom, equality and justice; however, it is not given to them rather they achieve it from patriarchal structures of society. The text is a powerful example of the struggle of women to rise.



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