

VOICING THE VOICELESS: A FOREGROUNDED ANALYSIS OF MARGINALITY AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN AQIB'S *DOWN TO THE DUST*

1 Muhammad Hassan Shah,

M.Phil Scholar, Visiting Lecturer, Department of English and Applied Linguistics,
University of Science and Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

2 Tahseen Ali Khan,

M.Phil Scholar, Visiting Lecturer, Department of English and Applied Linguistics,
University of Science and Technology (UST), Bannu, KP, Pakistan

3 Muhammad Afnan Khan,

BS English, Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Science and
Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

Abstract

This study, titled "Voicing the Voiceless: A Foregrounded Analysis of Marginality and Social Critique in Down to the Dust", explores the interplay of linguistic foregrounding, marginality, and social criticism in the poem "Down to the Dust" by Farzana Aqib. Using a stylistic and thematic framework, the paper analyzes the poet's use of foregrounding through anagrams and sound patterns that highlight societal issues such as poverty, gender discrimination, labor exploitation, and political instability in Pakistan. The paper contributes to the understanding of how poetic language can be utilized as a tool of resistance and social consciousness.

Keywords: foregrounding, marginality, social critique, Pakistani poetry, stylistics, anagram, gender, poverty, resistance literature

Background of the Study

Literature has long served as a mirror and critique of societal norms. In contemporary Pakistani poetry, marginalized voices increasingly challenge political, economic, and gender-based inequalities. Farzana Aqib's poem "Down to the Dust" exemplifies this trend by giving voice to the voiceless through a powerful blend of emotional appeal and linguistic strategies. The poem blends despair with a faint trace of hope to critique the socio-political and economic hardships experienced by the underprivileged in Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant body of poetry in Pakistan that addresses marginality and socio-political issues, limited academic attention has been given to how linguistic foregrounding in poetry can function as a tool for social critique. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the foregrounded linguistic choices in "Down to the Dust" and interpreting how they reflect the struggles of the marginalized.

Literature Review

Foregrounding, as introduced by Leech and Short (2007), involves the use of stylistic deviation and parallelism to draw attention to particular linguistic features that enhance meaning. This technique is widely used in literature to evoke emotional and intellectual responses from readers. Several scholars (Simpson, 2004; Freeman, 2005) have elaborated on how stylistic elements help encode deeper meanings. In the Pakistani context, poets like Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz have similarly utilized stylistics to critique patriarchy and

social injustices. Farzana Aqib joins this lineage by deploying anagrams and sound associations to highlight issues such as poverty, widowhood, war, and gender inequality.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs a textual analysis methodology grounded in stylistics. The selected poem, "Down to the Dust," is analyzed using Leech and Short's (2007) model of foregrounding. Specific attention is paid to anagrammatic suggestions and their contextual significance. The analysis includes intertextual references to Islamic teachings and global data, such as WHO statistics, to reinforce thematic claims. The poem's linguistic features are interpreted within the socio-political context of Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the stylistic theory of foregrounding proposed by Leech and Short (2007), complemented by concepts from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) to interpret the social implications of poetic language. The work of feminist theorists and Islamic jurisprudence on women's rights also informs the reading of gendered themes in the poem.

The application of Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic theory of foregrounding, which emphasizes the deviation from linguistic norms to create textual salience, reveals how Farzana Aqib's poem "*Down to Dust*" strategically uses poetic devices to direct readers' attention to critical social realities in Pakistan. The poem employs anagrammatic suggestions and metaphorical expressions to accentuate the emotional and psychological impact of systemic injustices. For instance, the transformation of simple sounds into words like "*less*," "*lament*," and "*loot*" serves as a form of foregrounding that disrupts conventional language expectations and highlights key themes of deprivation, sorrow, and corruption (Leech & Short, 2007). These stylistic choices not only engage the reader emotionally but also frame the text as a medium for social critique, drawing the audience into the lived experiences of Pakistan's marginalized populations.

Complementing this, Fairclough's (1992) model of critical discourse analysis situates language as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes societal power dynamics. Aqib's poem embodies this by embedding discourse that critiques political instability, gender-based marginalization, and class disparity. The symbolic use of words like "*widows*," "*war*," and "*unsettled*" invokes not only the pain of personal loss but also broader issues such as patriarchal neglect, socio-economic unrest, and institutional failure. Through these discursive choices, the poet challenges dominant narratives and highlights the urgency of societal reform. The poem thus transcends artistic boundaries, functioning as a socially engaged text that fosters critical consciousness and invites readers to question and resist prevailing injustices (Fairclough, 1992). In this way, "*Down to Dust*" demonstrates how poetic language can become a powerful tool for both stylistic innovation and socio-political intervention.

Analysis and Discussion

To apply Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic theory of foregrounding, complemented by Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to Farzana Aqib's poem "*Down to Dust*" from *The Stardust Drape* (2021), we must explore how poetic language highlights social issues and ideologies through both linguistic innovation and contextual critique. This analysis uses foregrounding to interpret the poetic devices and CDA to examine the socio-political implications embedded in the text.

Foregrounding and Deviance in Aqib's Poetic Language

Foregrounding, as proposed by Leech and Short (2007), involves the *departure from the norms of linguistic code*, used in literature to draw attention and enhance meaning. In "*Down to Dust*," Aqib foregrounds key emotional and social elements through phonological, lexical, and semantic deviations. The use of anagrams such as *less*, *lament*, *light*, *labor*, *loneliness*, *living*, *loot*, *luxurious*, *unsettled*, *widows*, and *war* are not just stylistic ornaments—they signal deeper thematic concerns and are *foregrounded lexically* to emphasize loss, injustice, and social deterioration.

For instance, the word "**less**" becomes the root of *hopeless*, *loveless*, and *lifeless*, encapsulating the despair of marginalized individuals in Pakistan. This foregrounding triggers the reader's emotional response and attention, enhancing the poignancy of the poet's message (Leech & Short, 2007, pp. 38–40).

The metaphorical use of nature imagery—e.g., "hope is just like the wind"—represents both ephemerality and the potential for change. This metaphor is a form of semantic foregrounding, where deviation from literal language invites symbolic interpretations of political and emotional turbulence.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Uncovering Ideology and Power Structures

Fairclough (1992) asserts that language is a social practice, and literary texts are shaped by and help shape ideologies. CDA seeks to uncover these *underlying power dynamics* and *discursive constructions of reality*. Aqib's poem, through its stylistic choices, discursively constructs the lived realities of disenfranchised groups in Pakistan—women, laborers, the poor, and widows.

For example, the mention of labor draws attention to the exploitation of the working class, critiquing economic disparities and systemic neglect. This is not merely a lament but a *discursive act* that challenges prevailing power relations by giving voice to the voiceless (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 87–90).

Similarly, the reference to widows, tied to Islamic teachings and social negligence, reveals how traditional values are co-opted or ignored in modern society. The intertextual citation of Islamic history and Hadiths becomes a powerful ideological tool, aligning religious morality with contemporary feminist concerns—an act of interdiscursivity that CDA identifies as key in shaping public consciousness.

The image of luxurious lives of the elite class juxtaposed against the *lifeless* existence of the impoverished foregrounds the socio-economic divide. This lexical contrast functions as a discursive strategy that aligns with Fairclough's (1992) emphasis on inequality reproduced through discourse.

Stylistic and Discursive Synergy

Through foregrounding, Aqib manipulates the phonological and semantic aspects of language to *shock*, *disturb*, and *evoke reflection*. This is not isolated artifice but a discursive strategy that, in CDA terms, shapes social reality by problematizing existing hierarchies and injustices. For instance:

"Light" symbolizes hope and governance, indicating that the darkness experienced by citizens can only be resolved through ethical leadership—a *political discourse framed poetically*.

The word "loot", suggesting corruption, is both a literal and symbolic expression of exploitation. The speaker's hopelessness transforms into implicit political protest—what Fairclough might term *resistance discourse*.

"Unsettled" serves a dual purpose: reflecting youth disillusionment and societal instability, and promoting adaptability—thereby integrating social criticism with an empowering message.

Discussion

Aqib's *"Down to Dust"* employs stylistic foregrounding to dramatize emotional and social realities, while CDA reveals how the poem challenges dominant ideologies and advocates for reform. This combined theoretical approach unpacks how poetic language is not merely aesthetic but deeply political.

The poem's use of sound patterns and anagrams produces a layered linguistic texture that reveals multiple socio-political concerns. For example, the word "less" emerges in associations with "hopeless," "loveless," and "lifeless," symbolizing the speaker's emotional desolation and societal abandonment of the poor.

"Lament" reflects sorrow for deteriorating public health in Pakistan, supported by WHO (2024) statistics indicating a rise in obesity and heart-related illnesses.

"Light" symbolizes hope and the need for moral and political clarity, metaphorically calling for honest governance.

"Labor" and "loot" juxtapose the struggles of the working class against the elite's corruption, aligning with discourses on labor exploitation.

"Loneliness" and "living" capture emotional and existential crises resulting from systemic failures.

"Widows" bring religious and historical perspectives into the poem, highlighting the neglected rights of women as per Islamic teachings (Ahmad, 2008; Surah An-Nisa, 4:19).

"War" metaphorically addresses social and internal conflicts, as well as failures in peaceful conflict resolution (Kagan, 2016).

Through these layers, Aqib connects individual despair to collective societal dysfunction, critiquing the status quo and urging reform.

Findings and Conclusion

The application of Leech and Short's (2007) foregrounding theory, supported by Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, reveals that Farzana Aqib's poem *"Down to Dust"* uses poetic language not just for aesthetic expression but to highlight deep socio-political concerns in Pakistan. Through stylistic choices like anagrammatic allusions and metaphorical imagery, the poet foregrounds issues such as poverty, inequality, corruption, and gender oppression. Words like "less," "lament," "loot," and "widows" serve as linguistic cues that intensify emotional impact and draw attention to marginalized voices. The critical discourse embedded in the poem critiques systemic failures and promotes social awareness, encouraging resistance against silence and apathy. Thus, the poem serves both a literary and socio-political function, making the reader conscious of the lived realities of the underprivileged.

The analysis reveals that Farzana Aqib uses linguistic foregrounding to amplify the voices of marginalized communities in Pakistan. Her use of anagrams and poetic imagery not only creates aesthetic depth but also channels strong socio-political messages. The poem is both a lament and a call to action, engaging with issues of poverty, corruption, gender inequality, and religious neglect. This study affirms the role of stylistics in empowering literature to voice the voiceless.

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