

**REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IN SOCIAL NORMS:
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF REHANA ALAM'S *THE TEA TROLLEY***

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ABSTRACT

The present study discusses Rehana Alam's novel *The Tea Trolley* (2017). The novel depicts, on a lighter tone, the story of Amna- a teen-aged girl of upper middle class, whose family is in search of a suitable husband for her. Thus, reinforcing her to qualify certain norms which are societal for the major part and gender based at times, her family and people around her expect her to meet the standards set by her parents or society. The story is set in Karachi (the capital city of Sindh, one of the provinces of Pakistan) in the years 1979 to 1980, the time when arrange marriage was a trend and tradition. The single story mingles other twelve tales narrated by relatives and friends, providing readers a supplementary viewpoint on this Middle Eastern tradition. The paper analyzes the novel with perspective of how social norms and gender norms exist and how they promote human action strongly in any society. Hence, under theoretical framework of Social Norm approach and Gender specific norms in it, this paper attempts to analyze the text of the novel with the questions as to how social norms and gender specific norms are represented in the novel and how far they effect human behaviors and actions. Social Norm approach has been presented at different levels in different disciplines like sociology, psychology, Social sciences, etc. The details of the theory is given in the section of the theoretical framework in the paper. The endeavor made in the paper through textual analysis concludes that every society has set certain norms which are informal, based on their values, customs and practices. And that these norms very much operate in the novel *The Tea Trolley*, for, the actions, behaviors and practices of the characters in the novel are strongly influenced by these norms. The study is qualitative in nature hence the technique of textual analysis is used to interpret the research questions.

Keywords: The Tea Trolley, Social Norms Approach, Gender Specific Norms, Rehana Alam

INTRODUCTION TO AUTHOR

Rehana Alam spent her childhood in Pakistan and there she grew up. She studied in Pakistan also had her higher studies in the United States. She has lived in different countries like Italy, Kenya, Turkey, Nigeria and Indonesia and thus possesses huge observations and

experiences. She is resident of both Pakistan and USA at present. She has also had her pen used for children's literature two times in Urdu language (her native language). *The Tea Trolley* (2017) is her debut novel for Anglophone world.

INTRODUCTION OF NOVEL

The Tea Trolley was published in 2017 by Outskirts Press in United States of America. The novel is set in 1979-1980s in Karachi (one of the big cities of Pakistan). The 'tea trolley' is a small wheeled object to bring tea and other eatable things to bring in the room where the guests are sitting in order to serve them things brought in the trolley. It is a custom in those years that a girl who turns into adulthood is required to get settled on the choice of her family.

The story treats the subject of matchmaking of Amna by her parents who are assisted by their relatives and friends in this task having the dominant view "Finding a husband is never easy". This view is presented in the short description on the back of the book. The description continues to mention that marriage is, for the major part, essential element of a contented life when it turns out to be happy; but altogether it remains a gamble one cannot judge at the beginning.

The novel depicts explicitly the stereotypes of the time in many ways e.g. finding the match for daughter or son to arrange marriage undertaken by parents. On the whole, the story revolves around an eighteen years old protagonist named Amna-an ordinary girl, 'yes Ammi no Ammi good girl persona', who comes off an upper middle-class, educated, Urdu speaking family. The story is set in 1979 and has an old worldly feel to it. Amna's father is a doctor. Her mother Rabia is a housewife who is well organized disciplined overall a perfect homemaker. Amna has one older sibling Nadeem who pursues Chartered Accountancy in the United Kingdom. Amna is studying a four year degree in a university and at the start of the novel she has finished with her first year and is on summer's long holidays. Amna's mother Rabia has made her mind to hunt the suitable husband for her daughter because she holds stereotypical belief that once a girl crosses particular age limit, take for instance, from 18 to 20s she may have more chances of loss of opportunities of marrying, to which she phrases as the "window of opportunity", once lost or closed it may not be opened or availed later. On the other hand Amna dreams of a higher studies and job opportunities of which desire even she never expresses

explicitly. She has been raised in a way that she sometimes thinks of that ‘window of opportunity’ which her mother has fixed into her mind; after all Amna embodies the ‘mother knows best’ mindset. Hence her family arranges different proposals’ invitation time by time to their home in order to have a talk and with a major cause to see Amna. Amna appears before each of them serves them using tea trolley. She meets with mixed sort of proposals; sometimes her family reject them on the bases of not meeting criteria set by them and sometimes Amna is dejected by proposals. Her family is in a search a perfect son-in-law who should be well established with a good profession like a banker, a doctor or a barrister with a solid family background of good financial and social status.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The researcher has set two research questions to investigate in *The Tea Trolley*:

- Q.No.1: How are the social norms and gender specific norms represented in the novel *The Tea Trolley*?
- Q.No.2: How far do the social norms and gender specific norms effect human (novel’s characters) behaviors and actions?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study is set as under, taken out of the research questions:

- This research study aims to explore how social norms, based on gender, specifically, effect human behaviors and actions.
- This study also aims to analyze how the social norms and gender specific norm are represented in *The Tea Trolley*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is in the field of literature; thus it is subject to descriptive data. The study is qualitative in nature. The methods of analyzing and evaluating is conducted for the research questions of this study by analyzing the text; which is a data itself. It is an explanatory analysis of Rehana Alam’s *The Tea Trolley*. The technique of Textual analysis was used to analyze and interpret the text to answer the research questions. For it is designed to put much importance to text and asserts multiple relative answers to the research questions and to find out author’s main issue addressed or the major

claim or thesis and whether the claim is qualified in terms of the characters and research questions. Textual analysis helps in identifying and shaping the meaning of the works; ultimately this method will be helpful to identify how the various statements related to research questions function to elucidate the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Erum Sultan on *The Tea Trolley* reviews that the novel is written in simple language and maintains the same tone with quite serene mode throughout. A simple and smooth story, which does not involve any strong conflict, goes around the corner penned by Rehana Alam. All the characters are depicted fixed and unchanged, identifiable and stereotypes; they are not unique in terms of their acts and expressions. Even the protagonist is presented a normal girl who is found in any society with normal attributes. The story moves with harmony altogether without exposing any clash. Sultan further opines that with the theme-attributes of the novel, like being short-sighted, stereotyped, “If only it had been a satire; then it would be a complete and almost perfect one (Sultan, 2018).

Ahmed’s (2018) review of the novel recommends the book with the high praise describing it as a lively and refreshing for its interesting mode of narration. The story contains twelve other interesting tales with different themes brilliantly tied together which makes the novel energetic and vivacious. A debut novel, the denouement is quite masterful. We have a new storyteller in our midst.

A review of the *The Tea Trolley* appeared, in The News, titled “On society’s view on marriage” written by Muhammad Omar Iftikhar, in 2019. He opines that Rehana Alam has brilliantly written upon the topic related to stereotypes of Pakistani women. Iftikhar points out the gut-wrenching reality of Pakistani society that girls with white complexion easily rather effortlessly get desirable proposals for marriage as compared to those dark-colored girls. He also indicates the stereotyped fashion of choosing a girl’s partner by typecast parents as presented in the novel. The reviewer also sets out the factor of the novel which exhibits society as conservative, demanding, discriminating and choosy on the basis of which Amna is not considered to be perfect daughter in law in the society with certain parameters. Iftikhar also notices pathetically inadequate norm of showing a girl to the groom’s family as if she is an object and a

business deal is about to happen between the two families. Another sorrowful situation occur in Pakistan society that of settling a girl when she merely reaches her teens.

On the whole Iftikhar's (2019) evaluation holds justice with the story of the novel. By pointing out the shortcomings of the society depicted in the novel, he has touched the reality.

Hence, it can be concluded that there is no scholarly study of the novel and novel can be studied from any framework of study which would be a fresh research on this novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There have been numerous studies on social norms despite from where their formation began is not well comprehended. Since the human history began, changes in the behavior could serve as normative influence.

Norms are some standards set by a particular society for their individuals to adopt in their behaviors. Although they are unwritten; these norms assert what an individual should do and what not to do, because they are generally endorsed by the society. They involve traditions, values and customs. Norms are therefore shared thoughts, attitudes, and values, governing appropriate behavior by describing what one ought to do, and in essence prescribe moral obligations (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). They are created and endorsed with certain functioning approaches although they may go through some modification time by time and may not sometimes. Individuals need to require consent by the society where they want to stay in a particular group and if he/she doesn't comply with those norms will have disapprobation from the group or society. Although every society differs from the other in the matter of the norms yet some share same. The distinction lies due to variety of culture, geographical setting and religious background. These norms encourage social control to great extent in spite of being non-formal laws. A social norm is "a generally accepted way of thinking, feeling, or behaving that is endorsed and expected because it is perceived as the right and proper thing to do. It is a rule, value or standard shared by the members of a social group that prescribes appropriate, expected or desirable attitudes and conduct in matters relevant to the group" (Turner, 1991:3).

Although as a theoretical perspective Social Norms Theory was pioneered in 1986 by Perkin and Berkowitz for the research on the use

of alcohol in educational institutes specifically presented in health issues. But the idea of social norm in this paper must not be identified with that particular study in the discipline of health. This study is conducted on a piece of literature and as literature is about human life hence this term is extended beyond that of health issues study. Hence the perspective or term can be extended to situations of social issue, individual behavior, health issues, etc. and can be applied to study a piece of literature.

To carry out this study on *The Tea Trolley* (2017) the particular framework of 'Focus Theory of Normative Conduct' is chosen.

After a bulk of scholarly studies on the norms which have been attached to human society and the actions; there comes the theory of normative conduct in 1998 with the collaborative work of Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren. This framework views that people are guided by the social norms in their decisions and their normal routine conduct.

They identified three types of social norms-one that based on descriptive kind; this leads human according to the external views of how for the major part people behave. Normally a society observes norms of behavior in public or at workplace or even in academics. For example public norms propound that an individual, when in public, must not occupy someone else's personal place or object without consent, or must discourage derogatory and racial comment keeping in view the sentiments of the next individual, or must encourage immediate apology or gratitude whenever needed, must discourage interference in public, etc. norms, related to workplace for example that the dress code must be decent, clean and wrinkles-free, or that an individual must encourage positive behavior, and avoid gossiping or being reverent and humble to fellow colleagues. Educational institutes also observe norms which are also followed strictly for example punctuality, seeking permission, avoiding bullying, etc.

The second one is injunctive; that leads human according to the majority's approval and disapproval. Certain societies have norms which are gender specific. Communities which assert gender specific norms for example assume women to be emotional while men as strong, women coward while men as brave, hence many of the gender norms are stereotypes and can be considered discriminatory.

The last one which is personal norms; leading human to one's own approval or disagreement.

They further discuss that being the part of society humans have to comply with certain standards set by the respective society. For instance in terms of cloth what to wear in certain platforms and how to behave in certain situations.

Social norms have a profound impact on influencing attitudes and behaviors, even though people are typically unaware of how influential social norms are (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008). In fact, people are strongly influenced by social norms even when they explicitly reject such norms (McDonald, Fielding, & Louis, 2013).

JUSTIFICATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social norms theory was, as discussed above, initially explored in the discipline of health issues; then in social psychology. As this theory is about human social behavior; this study justifies that theoretical framework of social norms may be applied to the study in the discipline of literature. Literature is artistic representation of life; the novel, as one of the genres of literature, depicts human psychology, conditions, society etc. through various characters. Hence, the framework of social norm theory is suitable in terms of the research questions and objectives of this study of *The Tea Trolley*.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

In the research paradigm, the study of novel *The Tea Trolley* has not been conducted since its publication. There are only a couple of reviews conducted on the novel, discussed in the section of literature review. Besides the study is analyzed from a different perspective of social norm which has not been conducted in the discipline of literature. Thus this study stands as significant and need of the time. Besides, the research findings of the study will potentially offer a platform for future researchers for conducting research on this novel.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Q.No.1: How are the social norms and gender specific norms represented in the novel *The Tea Trolley*?

By explicitly depicting social stereotypes of Pakistan, Alam has indicated towards certain norms operating in the same society. These norms control human behavior. As humans are production of the society simultaneously, they are to great extent effected by the norms

prevailing for longer time which has no specific timeframe. In the novel *The Tea Trolley* the protagonist Amna experiences the existing norms. Upon reaching adult stage of life, Amna is forced to think about her marriage. "Amna must be settled" (p.1); is the idea her family especially her mother holds. Meanwhile she usually thinks about finishing her higher education, she has no high aims but wants to be indifferent towards the serious responsibilities of marriage and relation involved in it. Though this thought plays a passive role as she has never argued with her parents in favor of her desires. She goes with their judgments and decision silently. On the contrary, the boys of the family are given opportunities of higher education and pursuing their dreams of their career; her brother Nadeem is studying Chartered Accountancy in the U.S and her cousin Zahid has earned doctorate title and is in pursuit of foreign postgraduate degree. The norms are gender based biased for they play discriminatory role in terms of the girls and boys. Thus substantiated, that the societal norms, set in the society, reinforce Amna's family to get Amna settled as soon as possible. For the society depicted in the novel, the societal norms are grounded on explicit biasness. For Amna's mother's philosophy about girls education, holds the idea that girls should only get a B.A. just in order to support herself in case her marriages no longer goes till end. She believes that a girl is a queen only in her husband's house (that impresses that she is a guest in her father's house and this is not applied to sons).

Amna has not many friends, she has confined her life with just one friend and her family. Her family invites suitors after suitors to look for her, and she is assigned a role of a hostess taking tea trolley towards them joining them by sitting on the 'designated chair' for her to be fully watched and observed. Even there are certain norms for girls' clothing when it comes to her proposals. Amna is directed by her mother to wear some bright and eye-catching cloths. She is not allowed or encouraged to have her own choice of cloths. She narrates her helplessness that she has to do whatever her family is asking to do. She is assigned to come ready in eye catching cloths in front of interested parties.

One of the great preconceptions lies in the depiction of 'window of opportunity', which is a symbol for a girl to seek the partner as soon as she is young, energetic and beautiful; otherwise she will lose her window of opportunity once she passes her teens. The window

symbolizes a girl's teenage and opportunity is associated with the possible good suitor; once the girl crosses teenage the window is closed for suitable and perfect husband for her. "And girls after eighteen go downhill in appearance" (p.11) says Amna's mother. The concept of 'window of opportunity' runs through the novel which reinforces that women are to be married if they are in teenage. Once they turn from teenage they lose the chance of getting good proposals. While the idea of window of opportunity does not imply with the men characters in the novel. They can get good proposals even at the age forty or above. As in the case of Amna's aunt; who gets married to much older than her age.

Another typical standard manifests a girl as a showpiece; like a showpiece is to be observed and checked wholly when purchased. The novel depicts the tradition of serving the invited groom and his family by showing them girl in a manner as if she is an object of buying. Amna dresses up according to the norms set by her parents and dragging the tea trolley in front of boy's family. And the family notices every tiny details of girl as a business deal. While the same is not applied to boy's family. Certain times Amna cannot please the visitors and other times they could not meet her parents' standards. Even in the choice of cloths certain norms are set which discourage Amna to wear cloths of her own choice; she has to wear dark-colored and catchy cloths to inspire the groom and his family.

Besides, there are various examples of a thinking that marriage is the main and only target for Pakistani women. As one of the characters named Samina is shown expert in household chores like cooking, cleaning and others, hence she is shown as qualifying the criterion of marriage now. For her the other art which is still to be experienced is to be a mother. Such stereotypes operate in the story that things like cooking, cleaning and motherhood are made equal to the high academics with the view that as if this is the only thing desired by Pakistani women. Women in the novel are born to get settled into a knot and later be responsible with the duties associated with the marriage. They are not provided with the opportunity of higher education and professional grooming. The only grooming which is focused in terms of girls is household responsibilities.

Another instance of biasness lie in the incident in which a proposal from a dark-complexion family is welcomed by Amna's family, on the contrary Amna is judged, upon her dark-colored skin.

This way, novel also exhibits the substandard of the society that girls with white color face get good proposals easily as compared to those who are not with fair complexion. Azra, who is Amna's aunt, had an extreme difficulty in getting proposals due to her dark color. People come to see her, 'They saw Azra Khala and left never to return. It must have been pretty soul-destroying for Azra Khala' (p.13). This is how society has set some standards in case of choosing a girl for the boys. They look for white complexion and if the color is not upto the standard they either get no proposal or have to compromise in certain things e.g. widower or older in age. Azra marries a widower who is fifteen years older than Azra. Azra later stands up and works as a businesswoman and comes out of her unhappy and boring knot. "She didn't divorce Najeeb Khalu, but she made him redundant" (p.20). Unfortunately she is perceived by the society as unconventional and self-assertive. This unfavorable commentary is made for women; not for men if she is holding her authoritative voice. Her success is judged on her being overbearing rather than her genuine merit attributes. This is the mindset created by the social norms based on gender specifically.

The family, where Amna's mother Rabia was married, was greatly educated; but only in terms of male-gender. Rabia was married in the middle of her studies in college. Contrary, her all three brothers-in-law were getting higher education in various institutes; one in the U.S, the other two in Karachi. While she was made for home chores and nurturing her new family. "Rabia made sure that her father-in-law and her brothers-in-law always had the meals they liked, that their cloths were washed....." (p.3). This is how she makes her life confined to make her in-laws satisfied. The men in the family are ruling authority while women are just confined to home chores.

There are certain norms and standards for women as wives; if they are good in cooking, household chores and taking care of their in-laws, especially husband, they are considered to be gentlewomen no matter how happy or uncomfortable they feel inside of their innermost with the new responsibilities. As one of the characters describes her life as a wife of a husband, "I made sure he had clean shirts in his closet and the food of his choice on the table. I considered that to be my role as wife. He... rarely noticed what I ate or wore. But he was unfailingly polite, a good provider, a fond father... It was a good marriage then, but my face did not glow" (p.43).

Q.No.2: How far do the social norms and gender specific norms effect human (novel's characters) behaviors and actions?

The norms are based on gender discrimination. Amna the protagonist of the novel suffer at the hands of society because of these norms. She was divided between her ambition to pursue her career and her family's desire of tying her into a marriage as soon as possible. She is not allowed to get herself too much decorated in any ceremony. She is not allowed to wear lipstick as this is a norm that unmarried girls are not to furnish themselves too much before marriage. She has no heavy embellished dresses to wear in parties only because she is unmarried. In spite of these substandard she is submissive to her family and never resists. She obeys and respect those norms even though they are based on discrimination. Rather she happily performs the duties she is asked for.

Thus discussed that the social norms depicted in the novel are completely based on gender specific biasness. Consequently, they limit women role to the confined parameters. In terms of their marriage they rely on 'window of opportunity', once lost cannot be revived. In terms of their education they depend on BA only which satisfies the family. In terms of their behavior they have to be reserved, not supposed to be outspoken, assertive and unconventional. In terms of their complexions they must be white. They must wear shocking bright colored cloths when it comes to their proposal invitation. Even though Amna possesses her inner voice which has some desires beyond that of setting into a marriage yet she is quite throughout the novel and resists herself from expressing her inner self to her family. This is revealed when she opens her to her cousin Zahid bhai. To him, she shares her feelings of a free-will; and it is only there, the reader comes to know that Amna has certain aims and ambitions for her career devoid of marriage. It is only at almost the end of the novel she expresses to her father saying, "I will do whatever you and Ammi tell me to do... I want to get married. But I want more than that. I want to study. I want a career. I don't want marriage to become my final destination" (p.170).

On the bases of the societal norms they talk undertone; not loud or overpowering. They are left at the mercy of their in-laws when married; Maryam, one of the characters, is married off in a very stern family who had asked her to change her ways according to their standards and norms. "Her desires were ridiculed and her wishes

thwarted” (p.19). Thus the society, is the novel, undermines women’s existence and authority.

In *The Tea Trolley*, men are shown to be professionally grown-ups with mature and responsible nature while women are confined to home decorating, taking care of husbands, in-laws and children. They are depicted as passive, submissive and obedient living a compromised life. “According to the patriarch, time spent with women was not conducive to passing exams” (p.19) as in case of Maryam’s husband. Her father in law ordered his son to shift in separate room from her wife. And if women were educated they rarely were allowed to work in society.

As the main theme of the novel is finding a perfect groom so the story revolves around match-making. But there are discriminatory approaches in terms of matchmaking. There are some stereotypical rules and norms based on discrimination when it comes to look for a girl e.g. her color complexion, her cooking skills, her submissive nature, rather her overall lifestyle, etc. On the whole she is thoroughly investigated in all aspects by the groom and his family. On the contrary there are not as much strict norms set for boys when it comes to the question of their marriage.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses Rehana Alam’s *The Tea Trolley*. This is a debut novel by Alam. The novel is published in 2017. The story is set in the years of 1970s in the city of Karachi, Pakistan. The story revolves around a teenage girl Amna who is about to pass her college study. Her family is in search of a suitable husband for her. The story is all about match-making, arrange marriage and brilliantly possesses the unchangeable norms, presented by her mother which is a production of the society. This all is shown through what Amna feels and experiences. The study has been carried out with the perspective of social norm theory specifically gender-based norms. Keeping up the two research questions as how far the social norms and gender specific norms effect human behavior and how these norms are presented in the novel. The study is descriptive in nature hence textual analyses is conducted as a method of research to come to an acceptable objective conclusion. The analysis of the novel through various characters’ behaviors and events suggest that there are certain norms set by the society which are for the major part gender specific. As Amna is

treated on the base of her female gender thus she has to comply norms specifically for female. She has to wear cloths according to her parents' choice. She has to be submissive and obey what her parents and society approve of. She has to limit her conduct according the norms set for girls. On the contrary these all standards are not applied for the male characters in the novel. Thus, the study finds that there are different norms set for girls based on biased and discriminatory attitude.

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