

WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN CRISIS: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST READING OF MOHSIN'S *THE DIARY OF A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY*

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Abstract

This research was based on Postmodern Feminist analysis of Pakistani elite society as it related to women's education based on the Postmodern Feminist interpretation of Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2008). This research emphasized that education was presented as a symbol of social position as well as a source of awareness, critical thinking and empowerment. The novel focused on the lives of upper-class women, who seemed cultured, but were constrained by social norms, materialism and shallow values. This work was based Postmodern Feminist theory which examined gender roles, identity, power, class consciousness, and the representation of women in society. The character of Butterfly was analyzed to demonstrate that for elite women, appearance, social image and luxury were more important than intellectual development and social responsibility. The discussion also examined the impact of patriarchal and class-based systems on perceptions of education and empowerment for women. This work used a qualitative method and textual analysis to interpret the selected text. The results indicated that education should not be limited to social status promotion but should also create awareness, develop independent thinking and contribute to social change. The research presented a critical discussion of women's education in the contemporary society of Pakistan, which was a valuable addition to the Postmodern Feminist literary criticism and South Asian literary studies.

INTRODUCTION

Women's education remains an important social issue in Pakistan because it is closely related to women's empowerment, identity, social participation, and development. Although educational opportunities for women have increased, access to education does not always lead to intellectual freedom, critical awareness, or empowerment. Askari et al. (2022) report significant differences in women's literacy, with rates of 80 percent in urban areas, 20 percent in rural areas, and 46 percent overall. Cultural restrictions, patriarchy, poverty, lack of female educators, and insecurity continue to affect women's educational opportunities. Therefore, women's education is not only a question of access to schools and universities but also concerns the quality, purpose, and social meaning of education.

In Pakistani society, traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes have historically influenced women's educational opportunities. Muneer (2021) discusses the effects of family attitudes and gender discrimination on women's education, while Pasha (2024) highlights the continuing preference for male education. Education can provide women with confidence, awareness, independence, and opportunities for participation in social decision-making (Reshi and Sudha, 2022). However, when education is valued mainly for social respectability, family status, or modern appearance, its empowering function becomes limited. This contradiction is particularly visible in elite social settings, where education may become a symbol of class and sophistication rather than a source of critical consciousness.

Class and social status also influence the way women's education is understood. Elite women generally have greater access to prestigious educational institutions and material resources, but this privilege does not necessarily ensure intellectual independence. Education may become associated with English language, fashion, social networking, lifestyle, and status. Gul et al. (2025) show how consumer culture can connect women's value with appearance and social recognition. Such conditions create a distinction between being formally educated and being intellectually aware. This distinction is important in understanding the representation of elite women in Pakistani literature.

Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* presents these contradictions through the character of Butterfly, an upper-class Pakistani woman whose life revolves around parties, fashion, gossip, luxury, and social relationships. Through humour, irony, and satire, Mohsin exposes the superficiality and contradictions of elite Pakistani society. Butterfly appears modern and sophisticated, yet her limited understanding of wider social and political realities reveals an intellectual crisis. Her character illustrates how education and modernity can become associated with social appearance rather than critical thinking and social responsibility (Mohsin, 2008).

The novel also represents the relationship between women's identity, patriarchy, and class consciousness. Although Butterfly enjoys material privilege, her identity remains influenced by expectations related to beauty, marriage, family honour, social reputation, and appropriate feminine behaviour. Hadi (2017) explains that patriarchal structures shape gender relations through unequal power and social control, while Ansari et al. (2023) emphasize the role of patriarchy in restricting women's agency. In the novel, these restrictions are not always expressed through direct oppression; they also appear through everyday social expectations and pressures. Similarly, Butterfly's tendency to judge people according to wealth, appearance, language, and social position reflects the strong influence of class consciousness. Her language, which frequently combines English and Urdu, also functions as a marker of elite identity and social positioning (Rehman et al., 2021).

A Postmodern Feminist perspective provides a useful framework for examining these contradictions because it questions fixed ideas about women, identity, and empowerment. Postmodern Feminism recognizes that women's experiences differ according to class, culture, language, and social position. Li (2023) emphasizes the fragmented and multiple nature of women's identities, while Kumar and Daves (2024) explain that Postmodern Feminism challenges fixed assumptions about gender and recognizes the diversity of women's experiences. From this perspective, Butterfly cannot be understood simply as either an empowered or an oppressed woman. She possesses material privilege and educational opportunities, yet her identity is shaped by elite culture, patriarchy, consumerism, and social expectations.

Previous research on *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* has examined issues such as satire, humour, consumerism, mimicry, language, class, and feminist concerns. Batool and Dastgir (2024) discuss cultural imitation and mimicry, while Hashmat and Saleem (2024) examine female sensibility in Pakistani chick literature. Other studies have also addressed the novel's representation of elite culture and social criticism.

However, comparatively less attention has been given to women's education as an intellectual and cultural issue within the novel. The connection between education, empowerment, elite identity, class consciousness, and patriarchal values requires further examination from a Postmodern Feminist perspective.

The present study therefore examines the representation of women's education and empowerment in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. It focuses particularly on how elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal values influence women's identity and the perception of education. The study argues that the novel presents a contradiction between formal education and genuine intellectual awareness. Through Butterfly's character, Mohsin exposes a form of superficial modernity in which women may appear educated and socially empowered while remaining influenced by restrictive social expectations and class-based values. The study thus highlights the importance of understanding education not merely as a qualification or symbol of status, but as a means of developing awareness, independent thinking, and empowerment.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the representation of women's education and empowerment in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* from Postmodern Feminist perspective
2. To find how the ideas of elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal values contributed to women's identity and education conception during the novel

Research Questions

1. How are women's education and empowerment represented in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* from the perspective of Postmodern Feminism?
2. What are the impacts of elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal values on the identity and perception of women in the novel?

Review of Literature

Research on women in Pakistani literature has increasingly focused on identity, empowerment, patriarchy, and the social conditions that shape women's lives. Anwar et al. (2024a) observe that Pakistani women's fiction has moved beyond simply presenting women as victims of oppression and has also explored issues such as identity, self-realization, globalization, and changing gender roles. Sohail (2021) similarly discusses the changing image of women and their efforts to challenge traditional expectations. Niazi et al. (2025) further explain that Pakistani women writers often represent female identity through resistance, social conflict, and fragmented experiences. These studies show that women's identities cannot be understood separately from the cultural and social environments in which they live.

Women's education is an important part of this discussion because it can provide women with awareness, confidence, and greater control over their lives. Reshi and Sudha (2022) describe education as an important means of achieving social, economic, and political empowerment. However, education does not always provide equal opportunities for all women. Muneer (2021) identifies family restrictions, concerns about honour and safety, early marriage, and patriarchal attitudes as important barriers to women's education in Pakistan. Halim et al. (2025) also emphasize that education can help women understand and question gender inequalities. Askari et al. (2022) point to differences in female literacy between urban and rural areas and identify poverty, cultural restrictions, safety concerns, and limited educational facilities as continuing

challenges. This literature suggests that education becomes meaningful when it develops awareness and the ability to make independent choices rather than functioning only as a social qualification.

Patriarchal values and social class further influence women's educational experiences and identities. Shoaib et al. (2025) show that gender socialization, socioeconomic inequality, and patriarchal attitudes continue to affect women's participation in higher education. Janjua and Kamal (2024) also connect patriarchal power with restrictions on girls' education. Ansari et al. (2023) discuss how social hierarchies and patriarchal structures contribute to the marginalization of women. These findings are particularly relevant to elite women, whose access to education may be greater but whose choices can still be shaped by family expectations, class values, and social pressure. Postmodern Feminism offers a useful way of understanding these contradictions. Kumar and Daves (2024) explain that Postmodern Feminism questions fixed ideas about gender and recognizes that women can have different and changing identities. Li (2023) similarly argues against treating women as a single, universal group because their experiences are influenced by their particular social and cultural contexts. This perspective is important for examining women in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*, where education, identity, class, and gender are presented through the experiences of elite Pakistani women. Butler's concept of gender performativity is also relevant because women's identities can be understood through the repeated social behaviours and expectations through which gender is performed and maintained.

A number of scholars have specifically examined Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. Anwar (2024b) discusses the novel's use of satire, irony, and fragmentation to represent tensions between traditional and modern values. Azeem et al. (2023) consider the novel within Pakistani Anglophone literature and argue that its representation of women moves beyond simple Western feminist categories. Hashmat and Saleem (2024) examine female agency in relation to globalization, popular culture, and neoliberal values. Batool and Dastgir (2024) focus on elite imitation, Westernization, and the identity problems created by a hybrid lifestyle. Fatima and Nayab (2025) also highlight the role of Western influence and hybridity in shaping elite identities.

Class and consumer culture are also important in existing discussions of the novel. Gul et al. (2025) examine the commodification of women and connect women's social value with beauty, marriage, consumption, and social performance. Nadeem (2024) similarly presents the novel as a critique of elite social values and gender relations. These studies help explain how material wealth and social status influence the way women see themselves and others. However, they also leave room to examine more closely how education itself becomes part of this social performance.

The novel's language and narrative style further strengthen its social criticism. Gull and Iqbal (2024) discuss the use of local expressions and terminology in constructing cultural identity. Rehman (2021) links code-switching and code-mixing with social hierarchy and elite identity. Saeed et al. (2014) show how Mohsin uses humour and satire to expose the upper class's limited understanding of serious social and political issues. Laskar (2022) similarly notes the contrast between Butterfly's interest in fashion, parties, and social status and the wider problems faced by Pakistani society.

Although previous research has examined feminism, female identity, elite culture, consumerism, satire, and patriarchy in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*, limited attention has been given to the specific connection between women's education, empowerment, elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal values from a Postmodern Feminist perspective. The present research therefore focuses on this connection. It examines how education is represented in the novel and whether it functions as genuine awareness and

empowerment or mainly as a marker of social status. It also considers how elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal expectations shape women's identities and their understanding of education.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine the representation of women's education and empowerment in Moni Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. Rather than using numerical data, the research focused on the meanings, ideas, and social issues presented through the characters, language, narrative voice, and situations in the novel. The analysis particularly considered how education, gender roles, social class, and cultural expectations shaped women's identities and experiences.

A textual and thematic approach was used to study the novel closely. The text was read several times, and passages related to women's education, empowerment, gender identity, elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchy were selected for analysis. These elements were then grouped into major themes and interpreted in relation to the research questions. This approach helped reveal the contrast between education as a source of intellectual development and education as a marker of social status within elite society.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary source of data was Moni Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. Relevant passages were selected through repeated close reading of the novel. Particular attention was given to the representation of female characters, their educational experiences, social behaviour, language, relationships, and responses to cultural expectations. The novel's humour, satire, and first-person narrative were also considered because they reveal the attitudes and contradictions of elite Pakistani society. The original methodology similarly identifies women's education, gender inequality, elite culture, class consciousness, patriarchy, and social values as central themes.

The selected passages were organized thematically and examined through textual analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis focused on two main areas corresponding to the research questions. The first examined how women's education and empowerment were represented. The second explored how elite culture, class consciousness, and patriarchal values influenced women's identities and their understanding of education. The language, actions, social practices, and attitudes of the characters were interpreted to identify the deeper meanings within the text.

Theoretical Framework

The research used Postmodern Feminism as its main theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Postmodern Feminism was suitable for the study because it questions fixed ideas about gender and recognizes that women's experiences are shaped by different social, cultural, and class contexts (Li, 2023; Kumar and Daves, 2024).

Butler's concept of gender performativity was especially important to the analysis. Butler (1990) argues that gender is produced and maintained through repeated social practices, behaviours, language, and cultural expectations. This concept provided a way to examine how female characters in the novel performed socially accepted forms of femininity through their appearance, speech, behaviour, education, and participation in elite social life. The methodology shared for the thesis also identifies repeated social behaviours, language, and cultural practices as important aspects of the Butler-based analysis.

The framework also considered power and discourse, drawing on Foucault's understanding of power as something that operates through everyday social practices, language, and relationships (Foucault, 1980). This helped the analysis examine how social expectations and dominant ideas about femininity influenced women's education and identity. In this context, education was considered not only as a means of gaining knowledge but also as something that could reflect social status, respectability, modernity, and class identity. Overall, the methodology connected close textual reading with thematic interpretation and Postmodern Feminist theory. Butler's concept of gender performativity provided the main lens for understanding how women's identities were shaped through repeated social expectations, while the broader Postmodern Feminist perspective helped examine the effects of class, culture, patriarchy, and social power. This approach allowed the research to explore the tension between education as empowerment and education as a form of social performance in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*.

Analysis and Discussion

Representation of Women's Education and Empowerment

Education, Class and Social Status

The novel presents education as an important marker of social position among elite women. Butterfly's comparison between Kinnaird College and Home Economics reveals that educational institutions are associated with different social classes. She says, "How dare she correct my Kinnaird College English when she only went to a bechara college like Home Economics?" (Mohsin, 2008: 32). Her reaction shows that education is valued not only for knowledge but also for the prestige attached to the institution. Kinnaird College becomes a symbol of elite identity, while Home Economics is associated with a lower social position.

This class-based understanding of education also appears when Butterfly describes herself as "convent-educated" and says that Kinnaird College is where "all the rich illegible girls go while they are waiting to be snapped up" (Mohsin, 2008: 7). The humorous use of "illegible" instead of "eligible" ironically suggests that education is closely connected with marriage and social status rather than intellectual independence. Similarly, Butterfly refers to Janoo's sisters as belonging to "the middle class or purdah types" because they attended Home Economics (Mohsin, 2008: 7). These comments show that education becomes a means of creating distinctions between women according to class.

Butterfly's criticism of people who pronounce "Musharraf" incorrectly as "Musharrat" further connects language with social superiority. She calls them "illiterates" and associates correct English pronunciation with refinement (Mohsin, 2008: 45). From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, these examples show how identity is shaped through social discourse and repeated cultural practices. Butterfly performs an elite identity through her education, language, and attitudes, while simultaneously reproducing class boundaries.

Education and Social Performance

Education also becomes part of Butterfly's social performance. Her use of English, Urdu, fashionable expressions, and elite vocabulary helps her present herself as modern and sophisticated. Her enthusiasm for "parties-sharties, balls-volls, and weddings-sheddings" (Mohsin, 2008: 32) demonstrates how social participation becomes an important part of her identity. Her excitement about February provides another example: "The best month of the year is February" because it brings "wall-to-wall functions" and numerous social gatherings (Mohsin, 2008: 40). These activities provide Butterfly with visibility and social recognition. However, the novel suggests that such visibility should not automatically be understood as genuine empowerment.

Judith Butler's concept of performativity helps explain this contradiction. Identity is produced through repeated acts, behaviours, and social expectations rather than existing as something completely fixed. Butterfly repeatedly performs the role of an elite, fashionable, and socially active woman through her language, dress, participation in gatherings, and concern with public recognition. Her identity therefore appears as something continuously performed within the social norms of her class.

Education, Awareness and Empowerment

The novel questions whether formal education necessarily produces intellectual awareness and empowerment. During the discussion of 9/11, Butterfly says, "Twin Towers have gone, Pantagone has gone, please switch to B4U" (Mohsin, 2008: 29). Her response is humorous, but it also exposes the gap between educational privilege and critical awareness. Instead of showing concern about a major global event, she turns towards entertainment.

A similar attitude appears when she describes discussions about "Talibans and Al Qaedas and jihadis and wahabis and suicide bombers and ISI" as "bore-bore things" (Mohsin, 2008: 131). Her response suggests that formal education and elite social status do not necessarily produce an understanding of political and social realities. Mohsin uses satire to expose the superficiality of an education that provides social refinement without developing critical consciousness.

This contradiction is central to the crisis of women's education represented in the novel. Butterfly has access to education, wealth, and social privilege, but these advantages do not necessarily lead to independent thinking. Her education appears to provide confidence and social sophistication, while its ability to develop critical awareness remains limited.

Fashion, Visibility and Female Empowerment

Female empowerment in the novel is also connected with appearance and social visibility. Butterfly describes wearing her "55,000 ka jora" with "Mummy's ruby jhumkas" before going to a social event (Mohsin, 2008: 27). Her detailed attention to clothing and jewellery demonstrates how appearance becomes a source of confidence and social recognition.

Similarly, Butterfly imagines herself wearing "Versace shades and silk kurti over tight jeans, diamond tops glinting" (Mohsin, 2008: 75). These images represent an elite form of modern femininity based on fashion, luxury, and visibility. Her confidence is therefore expressed through her ability to perform the expected image of a successful elite woman.

From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, this reflects the fluid and performative nature of identity. Butterfly continually presents herself according to changing social and cultural expectations. However, Mohsin's satire also questions whether such outward confidence represents genuine empowerment. The novel distinguishes between **appearing empowered** and possessing intellectual, personal, and social independence.

Impact of Elite Culture, Class Consciousness and Patriarchal Values

Elite Culture and Women's Identity

Elite culture strongly influences how women understand themselves and others. Butterfly measures social importance through gatherings, connections, and visibility. Describing a large social gathering, she says, "anyone who's everyone was there" (Mohsin, 2008: 38). Her excitement is based mainly on the presence of socially prominent people, showing that belonging to elite circles becomes a measure of importance.

The same pattern appears in her description of the “Oxbridge society” gathering in Murree, where she mentions golf, lunch, and “gup-shup” (Mohsin, 2008: 48). Such spaces represent privilege, prestige, and social belonging. Butterfly’s identity is therefore closely connected with the people she knows, the places she visits, and the social events she attends.

From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, these repeated practices contribute to the construction of identity. Butterfly continually performs the role of an elite woman through social participation and public visibility. Her identity is therefore not completely individual but is shaped by the cultural expectations of her social class.

Class Consciousness and Social Inequality

The novel strongly exposes the distance between elite women and poorer communities. Butterfly’s comment about an earthquake that it would “only affect the poor parts of town” and her ironic statement that “Earthquakes are very considerate that way” (Mohsin, 2008: 48) reveal her class-based worldview. The humour makes her lack of sympathy visible and allows Mohsin to criticize the social distance between privileged and disadvantaged groups.

Butterfly’s attitude towards domestic workers provides another example. She complains about “these people” and their “nakhras” (Mohsin, 2008: 47). She also says, “One has to take a stand with these people, na, otherwise they take walks all over one” (Mohsin, 2008: 46). The repeated phrase “these people” creates a clear distinction between the elite and working classes.

These examples show that elite culture shapes not only women’s lifestyles but also their perceptions of social worth. Butterfly’s privileged position limits her understanding of the experiences of poorer people. Her education does not prevent her from reproducing class-based prejudice, which further demonstrates the crisis of an education that fails to develop social awareness.

Consumer Culture and Social Identity

Consumer culture is another major influence on female identity. Butterfly explains, “all my coffee crowd have jamawars” (Mohsin, 2008: 24). Although she initially considers sending the shawl seller away, she changes her mind after remembering that her social circle owns similar items. She immediately calls the seller and buys the shawl.

Her statement that “All the old-money, khandani types have them like other people have napkins” (Mohsin, 2008: 25) further shows how luxury objects function as class markers. Expensive clothes, jewellery, and other possessions become signs of belonging to a particular social group.

This consumer culture affects women’s identity because social acceptance depends on maintaining the expected lifestyle. Butterfly’s choices are often influenced by comparison with other elite women. In this sense, identity is constructed through consumption, imitation, and social approval. Mohsin’s satire exposes the superficiality of a culture in which material possessions can become more important than knowledge, individuality, or intellectual development.

Patriarchal Control and Female Agency

Despite her wealth and social confidence, Butterfly remains influenced by patriarchal authority. Janoo describes her as a “talent-free zone” (Mohsin, 2008: 16) and says that she is “very limited” (Mohsin, 2008: 46). Although these comments are presented humorously, they show how male judgment can influence a woman’s perception of her own abilities.

Her statement, “Janoo wouldn’t allow me to ... sack him” (Mohsin, 2008: 79), further demonstrates the limits of her decision-making power within the household. Butterfly is educated and socially privileged, yet she does not possess complete authority over domestic matters.

These examples reveal that patriarchy can operate through everyday relationships rather than only through direct restrictions. From Butler’s perspective, gender identity is produced through repeated social expectations and practices. Butterfly’s acceptance of male judgment demonstrates how patriarchal norms can become normalized within personal relationships. Her outward modernity therefore exists alongside restrictions on her autonomy.

Family Honour and Social Expectations

Family honour and public opinion also shape women’s behaviour. Butterfly worries about what others will say about her wedding and fears that “our noses will be cut and our faces will be blackened” (Mohsin, 2008: 27). Her concern shows that reputation and social approval remain important even within a wealthy and educated environment.

The wedding is presented not simply as a private family event but as a public performance of status. Butterfly wants others to admire the clothes, jewellery, and arrangements and to recognize the success of the family. Her concern with public opinion demonstrates how women’s identities are shaped by expectations of respectability and social approval.

Thus, the novel shows that education and economic privilege do not automatically remove patriarchal and cultural pressures. Women may appear modern and independent while continuing to perform roles that are strongly influenced by family honour and social expectations.

Discussion:

Education, Identity and Performativity

The findings from both research questions show that education, identity, class, and empowerment are closely connected in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly*. Butterfly appears educated, confident, fashionable, and socially active, but her identity remains shaped by elite culture, consumer values, patriarchal expectations, and the desire for social approval.

Her changing appearance and cultural preferences further demonstrate the fluidity of identity. Her description of “Versace shades and silk kurti over tight jeans” (Mohsin, 2008: 75) combines different cultural and fashionable influences. Later, her decision to “become Indian also” and adopt Indian clothes and customs (Mohsin, 2008: 94) demonstrates how quickly her identity changes in response to external influences. These examples support a Postmodern Feminist understanding of identity as multiple, changing, and shaped by social and cultural practices rather than completely fixed.

The analysis also demonstrates that the novel does not reject education itself. Instead, it questions the purpose and outcome of education within elite society. Women receive educational opportunities, but education frequently functions as a symbol of class, refinement, marriageability, and social prestige. It does not always produce critical awareness, independence, or the confidence to challenge unequal structures.

Mohsin’s use of satire and irony makes this contradiction particularly visible. Butterfly can speak confidently, participate in elite social life, express her opinions, and enjoy material freedom, yet her worldview remains limited by class prejudice and patriarchal expectations. Her situation therefore represents a form of partial and performative empowerment.

Overall, the crisis of women’s education in the novel is not simply a lack of educational access. It is also a crisis of what education is expected to achieve. When education produces social status without critical

thinking, awareness, and independence, it cannot provide meaningful empowerment. Through Butterfly's character, Mohsin exposes the difference between appearing empowered and experiencing genuine empowerment. The novel ultimately suggests that meaningful women's empowerment requires education that enables women to think critically, develop independent identities, question patriarchal values, and recognize wider social inequalities.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows that women's education in *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* is strongly influenced by class, elite culture, and patriarchal expectations. For many elite women, education is presented more as a sign of status and respectability than as a means of developing knowledge and independent thinking. Through Butterfly's character, Mohsin highlights the difference between being socially confident and being genuinely empowered.

The novel also shows that a woman's identity is shaped by the social and cultural environment around her. Although Butterfly enjoys a degree of freedom, her choices are still affected by family honour, social expectations, class differences, and male authority. From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, the novel therefore presents women's identity as changing and socially shaped. It suggests that real empowerment comes not only from having education, but from using education to develop awareness, confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to make independent choices.

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