

Postmodern Multiplicity and Transnational Feminism in the Good Muslim, Burnt Shadows and the Low Land

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a wide range of issues that intersect with the lived experiences of the woman. The contemporary paradigm of transnational feminism locates the woman's positioning from a global perspective. It is to understand how modern day context of imperialism and colonialism affect the authenticities of women living in different places. For this purpose, contest mainstream representations of the non-Western woman in Western discourses, the transnational feminist campaigns to recognize inequalities across different groups of women worldwide. It is essential to realize that the movement, as are the women's realities, is not uniform. The presentation of female experiences in fictional works by, Kamila Shamsie, Jhumpa Lahiri and Tahmima Anam explore diverse and unavoidable themes of migration, diaspora, national and religious interventions, and patriarchal oppression etc. elements that are fundamental in shaping the women's lives. This research adopts the transnational lens in examining novels *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim* to investigate the South Asian moments of differences in women's unique experiences. Theories presented by Grewal and Kaplan support this study as a central theoretical framework in this qualitative research. It is through these experiences do we anticipate a subversion of the solidarity assumed by dominant discourses.

1. INTRODUCTION

A female literary tradition originating in the West, however, presents the threat of homogenizing the woman in a global context, in which First World theorists assume a shared sisterhood with women across the world. This hegemonic assumption disregards the personal, cultural, national and international realities of an enormous body of women globally. Whether it is from a Eurocentric desire to silence the exotic 'other' or a pedagogical process of focusing on dominant cultures, the Western feminist frameworks have essentially left out the non-white women who are burdened with colonial and diasporic legacies. It is ambitious to hope for a glimpse of the reality of women anywhere away from the British setting, but the theories perpetuated by her successors accumulate to form a theoretical and literary hegemony onto the other woman. Likewise, American second-wave feminist Kate Millet challenges the tyranny of dominant sexual stereotypes in *Sexual Politics* (1968), by closely analyzing the patriarchal bias in literary productions

and by exposing the male-dominated culture that produced literary works degrading to women. She basically discusses the grievances suffered by the woman writer in general, assuming a universal role in her examples and overlooking the woman outside the American culture. Similarly, Betty Friedan is also highly credited for addressing the widespread unhappiness among financially sound housewives in America during the 1950's and 60's. She challenges the female's sole familial purpose and emphasizes the importance of a career. Her conclusions are also based on research done on American households of a certain class, grossly excluding women not only from other geographical locations, but also from a wide range of economic classes. The list can be stretched much longer but it is clear that the non-white woman has not only been other by patriarchal traditions. They have also been other (or altogether excluded) by the white woman's literary traditions.

This continual exposure has created in me an understanding of not only the semiotic and traditional relevance between the Indian-Bangladeshi-Pakistani

'desi' cultures, but also the customs and the diasporic aesthetics of living in a foreign land. This positionality has allowed me to negotiate a space for myself within the intersections of the politics of race, gender, class, religion etc. unique to my shifting geographical locations. I have always found it difficult to identify myself within the theoretical frameworks offered by Western feminist discourses because of the tendency to homogenize women's realities into a universal Third World Woman construct. In the contemporary times of heightened postcolonial awareness, transnational migration and globalization, the need to examine positionalities outside such stereotypes has become increasingly urgent. Women writers of the greater Indian continent are steadily establishing a strong foothold in the international arena of literature. They reflect not only the women's struggle against an ingrained patriarchy, but also against the residue of colonial oppression, trauma of war, poverty, mass migration, loss of the homeland, nostalgia and against other forms of global hegemonies. This paper explores the authorship and creative representation of women in the Bangladesh-India-Pakistan triangle through the lens provided by writers highly popular in the region. The following chapters will look at the roles of heroines in Indian bestseller author Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland: A Novel* (2013), Bangladesh's budding literary star Tahmima Anam's portrayal of women in her novel *The Good Muslim* (2011), and Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie's female protagonists in *Burnt Shadows* (2009). It is through a comparative analysis of the novels that this paper explores the notions of identity and space negotiated by women in a transnational context.

These women writers and their corresponding novels are based on the following commonalities: The authors are all from privileged backgrounds and have received at least some education - if not all - from the 'center' (the Western domain). It helps to ground to this research that after receiving Western education, they are still able to write about their homelands and cultural experiences in a manner that not only captures the essence of their own roots but also detaches away from the Western ideologies to create their own. The results thus produce a literary identity hybridized, replicated, assimilated and impure. This fortifies the underlying principles of the transnational project and enables the analytical study of theories (subalternity, hybridity, diaspora, travel) and methodologies of examination. Secondly, the novels explore a wide range of female experiences in relation to the notion of gender in patriarchy. Each element is closely related to others - family, nation, religion etc. - and it is in these linkages that the

woman finds diversity in her placement. It also facilitates an understanding of how gender constructs are linked with colonial representations. As Grewal and Kaplan identify, "some feminist practices continue to use colonial discourse critiques in order to equate 'colonized' with the 'woman', creating essentialist and monolithic categories that suppress the issues of diversity, conflict and multiplicity within categories" (Grewal and Kaplan, 2000). To break clear of such categories, characters in the novels demonstrate the multiple identities in women both within and beyond domesticity, contesting the feminine roles that label them. Thirdly, the realities of the protagonists are encumbered by the trauma of war. This shows how the already-troubled female identities are further unsettled by political disputes, national or religious oppression and territorial conflicts. The escape is no longer a matter of spatial departure, but also of a personal negotiation with the circumstances rendered by getting caught up in between the cross-fire of regional politics. It also leads to examining the aspect of leaving 'home' and the new forms of diasporas, which are borne from a sense of displacement and the struggle to belong. The novels help to place the question of gender in such struggles, and depict the lives of women affected.

Using the above commonalities, this paper moves towards an estimated goal: to inspect the extent to which feminist interpretations of literature contribute to a transnational practice and how the fictional narratives exhibit efforts to recover female experiences in South Asian contexts. The transnational umbrella is too vast to encompass all the dynamic politics of genders and interrelated factors of influence (class, race, cultural diversity, national and local histories) in this dissertation. There are multitude theoretical mechanisms that can be integrated into the transnational study of women. For example, discourse on the woman's body is a diverse and divergent field of theory that lends to the transnational feminist agenda. The usage of language and semiotic mechanisms helps to establish structuralist arguments in destabilizing global feminism. Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray are important names in the field of linguistics and psychoanalysis and they focus on the political relationships between sexuality and language. In contrast, Judith Butler's examination of sexuality through body politics enquires into the constructs of gender by challenging de Beauvoir's hegemonic theory of one 'becoming a woman' and by putting forward the concept of gender performativity. It is thus impossible to conduct a research paper that captures all of the above streams of studies. My primary focus will remain on theoretical interactions

between postmodernity and transnational feminist modes. The paper will also look into the fluid identities encompassed by the woman's geopolitical positioning, and her cultural negotiations with the hegemonic structures of her surrounding realities.

This paper looks at the questions of modernity and postmodernity with regard to transnational practices in women writing. Even though we are constantly critiquing the limitations of modernity and enquiring after the system of effects that structure postmodernity, it is a readily accepted fact among feminists that postmodernism (and post colonialism) are deployed by women from different locations to give transnational platform the tools to combat homogenizing theories of the West. "However, many postmodernist or post-structural feminists do not utilize the transnational frame or consider discourses of race and history in their analysis of the agency of woman" (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994). Their suggestions run parallel with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's analysis where she implies that "feminist writings often colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, and thereby producing/representing a composite singular 'Third World Woman' an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (Mohanty, 1984). This paper looks at the theoretical overlaps through which transnational feminist practices presents itself in literature. The chapter will further attempt to demonstrate how Lahiri, Shamsie and Anam treat the literary aspects of the narration, characters and plots of their respective novels to reaffirm the transnational as a liberal framework, which does not reject dominant traditions but *borrow*s from them to create a hybridized discourse. Individual participation in this discourse is an imperative variable. This research examines the identities embodied by women, but through their unique negotiating abilities with patriarchal tools such as nationalism and fundamental practices of religion. Here the transnational framework will come handy in not only critiquing patriarchal hegemonies, but also in destabilizing Western assumptions of a shared oppression among South Asian women. By scoring in on the fictional trajectories of *The Lowlands*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim*, this chapter will emphasize the protagonists' individual experiences in relation to the plots. This is to evaluate the significance of circumstantial differences and multiplicity of the South Asian contextual realities. The comparative analysis between the novels aims to entail a liberal perspective of the South Asian woman under the transnational feminist light.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To present the cultural restrictions associated with feminist perspective.
- To present the oppressed state of women of the third world.
- To highlight the feminist issues related to South Asians women.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q. 1: How the stories and characters have projected by the authors under feminist discipline?

Q. 2: How patriarchy has projected in the fiction as a sense of superiority over women class in South Asian region?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The feminist liberation movements have continued to take up the form of discourse through which the consequent waves encompassed the political, social, economic etc. factors of the struggle. Women's writing and formulation of theoretical frameworks became the key catalysts to drive along and accelerate the movement, which is also why theories on feminism and women's literature experienced a rapid rise – first in the West, and then gradually across the world. Transnational practices in academia emerged as a joint venture between feminist communities aspiring to address and fill in the gaps between different theoretical applications in literary and academic traditions. Selective works of literature have use to examine how transnational aspects of theoretical analysis play out in the fictional works by contemporary women writers. While many emerging strands of feminisms (black, Caribbean, Latin, Chicana etc.) contribute to the umbrella discourse, South Asian feminism is experiencing a decline under the steady attacks from right-wing nationalism and religious fundamentalism, the co-option by 'NGO-ization' and neo-liberal state agendas since the 1970's (Roy 2012). In attempts to introduce a 'new wave' in the region, methodological compilation of theoretical essays and fictional works are employed among many female writers. In their opinion, transnational feminism is a far more inclusive movement which takes into account the aspects of race, class, gender, history etc. and their corresponding relationships between people, capital and ideas. This research is qualitative in nature.

5. ANALYSIS

The curious overlap between theoretical streams is evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's writings. Her novels on displacement and diaspora among Indians living in America destabilizes the much harped-on binaries

between the West and 'rest'. The motive for choosing Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland* for this research analysis over her other highly acclaimed works, such as *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, stems from the nature of the plot's geo-politics that is central to shaping the transnational feminist arguments. One of the appeals of *The Lowland* is that it does not come across to the audience as a feminist read. What Lahiri maintains throughout her narrative is a fair balance between gender divides. The fraternal relationship between male protagonists Udayan and Subhash is central to the story because not only does it determine Gauri's fate, but it also links the problematic counterpart of nationalistic politics with the family's troubles. The traditional gender binaries and consequent roles in domesticity and parenthood are seen subverted when Gauri settles in Rhode Island with Subhash after Udayan's death. The migration aspect of the novel further blurs the center-periphery model; although the movement from India to the United States appears unidirectional, there is a predestined return to the homeland. If America is the center where Gauri is empowered with an academic career, it is also where she subverts her —entitled role as a traditional Indian woman. She chooses to leave her family for complete independence and remains an absent parent to Bela. She further experiments beyond normative practices by often engaging in homosexual activities.

Lahiri chooses to embrace in her novel what can be identified as the stylistic conventions of modernism and postmodernism. She follows a loose and fragmented style of modernist narration, blocks of testimonies that are apparent in Gauri, Subhash and Udayan's voices throughout the novels. There is heavy nostalgia from a constant practice of looking back to the past, and it is a story told almost entirely from multiple troubled memories. Nevertheless, there is some forced interaction between the chapters recounting the past and present lives, which lead to incoherent dissociation, a postmodern temporal distortion. Struggles are individual, yet there are frequent reference to the movements of India's Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) and subtle fictionalization of revolutionaries Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar, all of which reminds readers of postmodern literary techniques. Even in the stylistic presentation, there are infusions of multiple frameworks. Similar subversions are found in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. The regular movement between spaces makes the readers suspicious of the center-periphery model – Hiroko Tanaka is always an outsider to any of the place she settles in, but her sense of self is impossibly grounded. She does not inhabit multiple spaces at once; with every shift she

removes herself contextually but also keeps true to her Japanese roots and identity. It is not an artificial fluidity that is imposed on the narration through textual conceits of modernism. It is, instead, a fluidity arising out of adjustments made in whatever context presents itself. This state of fluid 'inbetweenness' does not only weaken conservative and modernistic notions of nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, feminism and terrorism, but it also perpetuates a restorative power of a postmodern fulfilment. Hiroko's multi-dimensional approach towards cultures, languages, peoples and regional politics is very postmodern. The plot relies heavily on the adverse effects of globalization. Fundamentalist behaviors bring tragic deaths to Sajjad and Harry, and mobilizes a manhunt for Raza's suspected involvement with Islamic terrorist groups. Although it would appear that Hiroko's migrations are Eurocentric and that she has been othered by a model favoring the center, the incentives behind her choices are not determined by modernist values, but by contemporary global fundamentalism. The novel being narrated in a third-person voice helps in establishing equal male and female perspectives. As opposed to radical feminism, this demonstrates how the transnational practice of the women writing does not necessarily exclude men, patriarchy, global politics and cultural values from their own inherent realities.

In contrast, Tahmima Anam's heroine in *The Good Muslim* struggles against an ingrained patriarchy following the Liberation war of Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi novelist portrays the post-war rise of Islamic fundamentalism, tyrannical dictatorship in a new-born country and their effects on protagonist Maya's family. Her once-secular brother Sohail attempts to find peace in religiosity but is swept away by puritanical ideologies. Anam's narrative plays a strong role in providing an alternative story of women who do not readily give in to subordination. In an interview with NPR's Linda Wertheimer from the BBC studios in London, Anam talks about the untraditional role projected through her protagonist.

“Maya is a fiercely independent character who can't come to terms with her brother's new found faith and ideology, experiencing the freedoms of fighting in her own country's war, helps her emerges with a strong sense of her identity as a woman. She becomes a doctor and an activist, roles that, as Anam points out, strain against the traditional roles of

women and not just women in the Muslim world: Even though she comes from this very conservative society ... she espouses a lot of the hopes and dreams that women all over the world have, including in the Western world.” (Anam, 2011)

The themes of this novel criticize some of the modernist binaries perpetuated by gender politics, patriarchal manipulation of religion, the silencing of women to attain a clean and linear national history, family values, the legitimacy of exile and return etc. These famous words by Virginia Woolf have been extended by Western feminists to justify the vision of a global sisterhood of women with shared values and hopes, irrespective of the location women occupy. “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Woolf, 1938). As a practicing doctor with liberal sensibilities, Maya is first seen rebelling against her brother Sohail’s drastic conversion. She later attempts to bargain with him in order to bring about a circumstance tolerant of both religious and secular ideologies.

Maya looks disapprovingly at the veiled women who garb themselves with heavy clothing in the intense heat, and she shares the perception present in Western representation of the veil. As Leila Ahmad recognizes:

“Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.” (Ahmed, 1992)

It is towards the climax of the novel when she loses her nephew Zaid to fanatical ‘huzoors’ that there is an anticipation of a possible futility of her efforts. However, Anam also concludes the novel by bringing the perpetrators to justice years later. It leaves the readers hopeful of the negotiations of a strong-willed woman living in a transiting society. Because it is a text struggling to salvage identities in the intense nation-making power-play, the women contribute vitally in the reassertions of transnational arguments: the realities of women of this community cannot be compared with those who do not share the memories of colonial structures and the violence of unchecked patriarchy. Abeda Sultana analyses the women

subordination and patriarchal structures in Bangladesh. She finds that gender inequality is practice sustained meticulously through the biased interpretations of religion and nationalism:

“The main problem of subordination is not really religion or tradition, but patriarchal influence and authority, it is men who have interpreted religion, moulding it and perpetuating the patriarchal domination which has strong links with the issue of gender inequality.” (Sultana, 2010)

The stylistic register of the narrative is also rather fragmented. Although told largely from the perspective of Maya, the plot shifts between different points in time, as though disjointed memories of the past finds itself irrevocably linked to the present. Unlike in modernist literature, this fragmentation does not depict an existential crisis in the narrator. Maya’s resilience and actions are firmly placed within the free-thinking precincts of her beliefs. There is nostalgia in her stream of thoughts but Anam also demonstrates that the chaos is insurmountable. By the assimilation of modern, post-colonial and postmodern aesthetics worked into the novel, the author is successful in detailing a difficult historical moment for women. Their experiences encompass borders of patriarchal suppression, national appropriation of women and the questions of familial roles – all of which signifies a literary form of transnational participation.

6. FINDINGS

Transnational feminist practice in literature is not a new concept. Its origins were forged in postcolonial movements, but it is only in the postmodern recent times that feminists are recognizing its magnitude and mobilizing around it. While formulating their ideas to endorse transnational articulation of feminist expression. This dissertation attempted to lay out only a few of the abundant issues shaping the realities of women living in diverse locations. The challenges faced by transnational feminist tradition in the literary academia lies in combating the hegemonic discourses of representation. Whether it is a completely Western representation or a mediated one, feminists must be cautious of its production and of the power relations between the key concepts enforcing it. This is why broad-spectrum theoretical frameworks cannot fully account for the lives that are self-presented. In order to explain narratives produced by women under transnational light, feminists must be open to the idea of theoretical overlap and *selective borrowing* from existing dominant frameworks (both the stylistic and aesthetic

traits). The transnational agenda, however, cannot allow for the superimposition of any complete framework on textual subjects. As a result, unique trends of reading, writing and interpretations of literature are created. In this dissertation, I argued that the postmodern stream is a facilitator of the transnational feminist project, mostly because of its characteristic treatment of de-centered multiplicity and its approval of coexisting cultural paradigms. The emerging works can, therefore, hope to inspire a more inclusive framework, which will embrace the cultural, historical and racial aspects of the lives of the women in concern. By focusing on novels *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim*, I attempted to illustrate a South Asian context of transnational women's culture presented through fiction. The authors portrayed a wide range of subjects that formed the circumstantial realities of the female protagonists. My discussions are limited to the evaluation of these women's locations and how it develops the psychic space they come to occupy. The cross-cultural movements and spatial journeys render a diaspora in them that, contrary to popular belief, may not always be problematic. As a response to the movement and corresponding diaspora, the women are seen to embody multiple identities which would not have surfaced if they remained in static positions. Their cultural interaction and personal negotiations demonstrate a fluidity in their own beings, which contributes heavily to the subversions of stereotypical imaginations of the Third World women in Western discourses. This paper, thus, aimed to identify some of the redeeming features caused by transition.

Additionally, the seminal hegemonies characteristic to the location, such as nationalism and patriarchy, are equally important in the analysis of women representation. Dominant nationalist discourses frequently commodify gender into constructed domains and patriarchal tools such as religion continues to exercise power over women to sustain the domains. Nevertheless, such assumptions cannot be taken for granted to explain every woman's case in South Asia. Before glorifying or condemning national or religious traditions, feminists must understand the woman's own confrontations and conciliations with such traditions. Using the novels' heroines as mediating points, examples of women's personal negotiations with hegemonic power-structures is highlighted. Not all women who suffer in the hands of nationalism endure identical degrees of patriarchal or religious oppression, and vice versa. This dissertation emphasizes the *difference* in women's everyday reality of the *same* location. While academic assessments have already acknowledged class, race, gender etc. as determining

factors of a woman's truth, transnational interpretations of literature will fill in the gaps between such determinants and show that personal *experience* is vital in articulating the difference. My project has, for that reason, invested minimally on theory and heavily into the texts 'plots and the female protagonists' personal experiences.

7. CONCLUSION

The counter-cultural lives, even by the South Asian standards, that we see led by women in these novels is not only a celebration of a 'liberated' self, but is also an emphasis on the multiplicity of a woman's role. Gauri is seen embodying all these roles at separate points in her life. She is an active revolutionist during her student days in India, which she gives up to become a doting wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. She is only able to discontinue her wife/mother role in Rhode Island, after which she takes up being a high career woman in academia. Hiroko Tanaka's role in *Burnt Shadows* is ultimate multi-national woman. As a Japanese translator from Nagasaki, she is linked to her British friends Weiss-Burtons couple through her association with German fiancé Konrad; she is married to Muslim Indian Sajjad during the Partition and becomes mother to Raza, a true citizen of Pakistan. Her later years also make her a pseudo-grandmother figure to American Harry's daughter Kim in the tension-fraught post-9/11 New York. These novels lend immaculate insight in transnational women experiences by portraying border lives of women and their consequent negotiations within their own unsettling spaces. However, *The Good Muslim* remains a novel very much centered on women's struggles with war and patriarchy at *home*. There is no transcending borders, no cross-cultural migrations and returns. The novel successfully highlights the patriarchal and national interventions in the formation of the woman's reality in the early days Bangladesh. While there is hegemony exerted by the condescending politics played by nationalistic and religious fanaticism, there are also instances of subversions which question the very ideals behind such fundamentalisms. The compromises made by women for such developments are also scrutinized. It has further examined the interfaces of the center-margin binaries through discussions of women's altering realities. The location of the women has remained central to the discussions. Through the readings of the novels, it addresses the woman's engagement with nationalistic discourses and further highlights the moments of subversions within fixed models.

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