

Subverting the Trope of ‘Agentic West and Passive Rest’ In *Shadow of the Crescent Moon* and *The Miraculous True Story* of Nomi Ali

Abstract

*The white Western feminism essentializes “Third World” women as monolithic passivity in binarist relationship with Western women’s supposed agency, a colonial theoretical position on eastern women. Mohanty subverts this universalization of Eastern women’s praxis in homogenized colonial discourses which conceptualize eastern women’s situation with totalizing indifference to the diversities of their socio-cultural life. Employing Mohanty’s theoretical stance on white western feminism’s essentialism, this article analyzes two works of Pakistani literature in English *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2015) and *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019). The article focuses on how these works place their female subjects with varying agencies into their particular historical political praxis and portray agentic individuals who lay claim to their body and sexuality on one hand and demystify the West’s essentialism on the other.*

Keywords: *First World Feminism, Third World Feminism, agency, essentialism, Pakistani Literature in English.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist literature and theories from Third World locations have sought to challenge and displace First World feminism’s ethnocentric and essentialist tropes about non-Western “Third World” women. The constitution of “Third World women” as a monolithic subject by the Western Feminisms and their binarist logic of ‘an agentic West and passive rest’ has been a focus of scrutiny since the publication of Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984). Mohanty, in her seminal work, stressed the need for placing the agency/passivity of the third world on “concrete historical and political praxis” instead of employing “sociological and anthropological universals” (Mohanty, 1984, pp. 334,337) which were widely popular with First World feminists of the second wave. She suggested to deconstruct and displace the essentialism of Western

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discourses by situating the multifaceted and diverse agency of particular subjects within specificities of their ethnic, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Taking a cue from Mohanty (1984), many theorists and anglophone novelists from postcolonial locations like Pakistan have subscribed to her politics of historical praxis. The postcolonial writings from these locations showcase a variety of “Third World” female subjects who are seen negotiating their multilayered and complex agencies in their particular contexts. Aroosa Kanwal (2018) argues with reference to Pakistani Anglophone writings: “Rooted in the multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature of women’s subjection and agency, Pakistani Anglophone writing indubitably calls for new as well as alternative ways of thinking and acting” (p. 129). This recourse to alternative ways of thinking by Pakistani novelists becomes more pertinent in the aftermath of 9/11 as the West’s essentialist representation gained a neo-orientalist currency. The fictional writings of Fatima Bhutto and Uzma Aslam Khan stand out in this regard as they foreground the diverse agency of their female subjects. Taking insights from the theoretical notions of Mohanty and her predecessors, this research paper seeks to interpret and analyze the multifaceted and diverse agency and subjectivity of the particular ‘Third World’ female subjects portrayed in Fatima Bhutto’s *Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2015) and Uzma Aslam Khan’s *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019).

Theoretical Framework: Rescuing Third World Women From Eurocentric Discursive Regimes

Mohanty’s *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984) is a groundbreaking and enduring contribution to the polemic on agentic first world women vs passive third world women binarism which manifests itself in the liberal and radical First world feminist critiques. In this essay, she deconstructs First World feminism’s monolithic, essentialist and ethnocentric construction and representation of third world women in their writings. She reveals how these efforts at theorizing “third world women” are totally oblivious to the diversities, material realities, ideologies, cultural and historical mores, and institutional dynamics that surround the lives and bodies of the women they seek to theorize. Mohanty (1984) accuses Western feminists of the preconceived construction of eastern women as a coherent group, the view that conveniently ignores the differences of class, location, race, and ethnicity (p. 336). This presumptive and stereotyped representation of all western women as a coherent homogeneity can be seen as a “colonizing move” which paves way for universalizing colonial strategy that obscures women’s agency through homogenous systematization of the varying experiences of women’s different groups, erasing thereby the resistant specificities of the margins (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352). This is how the Western feminist discourse reduces the non-Western women to ‘colonial others’ by subjecting them to the lenses of “secondary sociological and anthropological universals” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 337). Mohanty detects the orientalist, essentialist and ethnocentric imperative behind western feminism’s one-size-fits-all construction of other women as passive victims of oppression, hegemonic patriarchy, and violence. For Mohanty, this totalization and oversimplification operates in an utter denial of the complexities and diversities of feminine experience in different spatiotemporal settings and effectively decimates any arguments on the difference. This construction sorts the women into two categories: western women who are active, liberated, and regulating their own bodies and sexuality, and third-world women who are uneducated, victimized, and passively subservient to sexual repression. This archetypal

grouping fixes them into socio-politically powerless fixity (Mohanty 339) which problematizes any possibility of transition. This myth of the active west and the passive rest operates on the trope of victimized women: universally dependent, condemned to masculine sexual and colonial violence, passive cogs in the patriarchal family system and developmental procedures, incorrigibly worsened by religion.

Mohanty argues that western feminist writings homogenized third-world women on the assumption of “shared dependencies”. She cites these lines from Cutrufelli (1983) as a specimen of homogenization as in the claim that “all African women are politically and economically dependent” (cited in Mohanty, 1984, p. 343). This presumptive sociological grouping, according to Mohanty, imbues an ahistorical powerlessness without due consideration to the specification of location and social networks of power that subordinate them (Mohanty, 1984, p. 340). Mohanty deems it as discursive colonization which subjects them to sexual and political manipulation before their placement into social patterns (p. 340). Mohanty (1984) finds similar lacunae in the western feminist analysis of kinship systems and their religio-cultural contexts. The patriarchal family system that affects the whole sociological group of women operates independent of class and cultural variations system. Consequently, it results in positing an unchanging model of family over time and space. For example, *all* Arab and Muslim women are put into monolithic oppressed communities, homogeneously subservient to patriarchy since the era of the prophet Muhammad. This argument conveniently places them “outside history” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 342). Mohanty asserts that many like Juliette Minces are guilty of perpetuating and popularizing this skewed and “almost identical vision” (p. 342) for Muslim womanhood. She contends that reductive and simplistic ascription of veiling to internalization of Islamic injunction is given as the only explanation without any recourse to economic and security perspective. She mentions Modares to assert that Muslim women are seen as an unrelated category upon whom an ‘Islamic Theology’ has been superimposed (p. 342).

A similar reductionism plagues western feminism’s analysis of the relationship of third-world women to the economic system. Mohanty (1984) reveals how such analysis homogenizes women as universal dependents across cultures and classes. This practice results in producing a category of women that is devoid of its socio-economic-political agency. These simplistic formulations cement the oppressive binarist constructions which nullify any possibility of the attribution of agency to the non-western women.

Mohanty (1984) explains how this attribution of passivity/victimhood/subservience to non-Western Third World women through collective othering is born out of ghettoizing tendencies. “Beyond sisterhood, there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism!,” laments Mohanty (p. 348). Patricia Hill Collins (1986) validates Mohanty’s stance on the imperial and colonial impulses of the second wave white feminism by asserting that the oppositional differences between the First World and the Third world women cement into the binary of superiority/inferiority, a hierarchy strengthened by “political economies of domination and subordination” (p. 520). Therefore, Mohanty (1984), justifiably, detects the so-called “colonialist move” in this constitution of a colonial Other. Taking a cue from Foucault and Said, she asserts that Western feminism engages in the discursive politics of sexual difference

about third world women to posit a positive self-representation. The tropes like “the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife” (p. 352) are circulated in order to cement an image of non-western women as a universal category frozen in time and space. On the other hand, the western woman is established as progressive, unfettered, and enlightened. This maneuver buttresses the sense of superiority of the western women which automatically hinges on depriving others of their agency and subjectivity.

Mohanty suggests countering these imbalances and retrieving the agency of third-world subjects through the strategy of ‘context-specific differentiated analysis’ which carefully historicizes Third World women. She cites Maria Mies’ work (1982) as an example of a context-specific, situated, and politically focused analysis: “Mies’ analysis of this particular group of women is situated at the center of a hegemonic, exploitative world market” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 345). For Mohanty, situatedness should be employed as a countermeasure to rid the knowledge of its “hegemonic humanistic problematic” (p. 352). She cautions against trivializing the nature of specific acts of oppression and struggle by uprooting them from their situatedness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mohanty’s theoretical underpinnings resonate across theory and imaginative literature. They have engendered an array of scholarly critiques within feminist scholarship on the parameters set by her. Western feminism has been questioned by a variety of intersecting feminist strands, for example, black feminism, postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, ecofeminism, and Islamic feminism that have derived their inspiration from her to propose alternate epistemologies that disturbed anthropocentric maneuvers of Western epistemes. For example, the reductive trope of oppressed veiled Muslim women has received an additional focus owing to its wider political implications. Khan (2005) points out the flaw of (Canadian Nation’s) imagination that conceives Third World women as static fixtures and subservient victims to patriarchal violence and Islamic practice of veil further deteriorates the situation for the oppressed women (pp. 2023-2024). Myra Macdonald (2006) argues that discursive representation of veil serves as a strategy against Muslim women and Islam:

Expressions of surprise, even in the twenty-first century, that veiled Muslim women can appear as Olympic athletes, “suicide bombers,” feminists, politicians, musicians, or even comedians, underline the tenacity of beliefs that Islamic veiling is intrinsically incompatible with women’s agency in the construction of their identities. (p. 7)

As a consequence of Mohanty’s intervention, the notions of feminine agency, which was defined by western feminism exclusively with reference to the opposition and resistance to patriarchy, have been subjected to the element of historical analyses of the relation of particular subjectivities to power. Joseph D. Parker’s (2012) insight on the issue is that feminist resistant agency emerges from non-totalizable, incommensurable contradictions that refute Eurocentric monolithic subjection. These contradictions resist totalizing coherence under the modern power/knowledge paradigm and expose exploitative epistemic violence (pp. 15-16). The third-world feminist agency now stands poised to challenge the local and

global patriarchy as well as to rescue itself from the discursive regime of orientalist/neo-oriental epistemic violence of its own gender from the West. It can now be seen, says Parker (2012), as re-envisioning the stance in a social locational specificity to dismantle modern discursive regime (p. 1).

Mohanty's article has been instrumental in initiating certain lines of inquiry that have focused on the representation of the "Third World women" in the western discursive regimes. The scholarship has been preoccupied with essentialism and monolithic constructions about the "Third World women". Parameswaran (1996) appropriates Mohanty's theoretical notions to analyze the media or journalistic coverage of "Third World women" in the US print media. Mabro (1991) combined Said and Mohanty's theoretical lenses to examine the Western travelogues' tendency to ascribe an essentialist and monolithic identity to Arab women. Mabro concludes that these elitist and racist travelogues employ generalizations and stereotypes to deny the Middle Eastern women of their complex and multivalent agencies. In the same vein, Doezema (2001) focuses on First World feminism's obsession with the 'third world prostitutes'. She too detects the colonial interventionist agenda of Western feminism which is aimed at advancing the feminist interest of the first world feminism instead of those which truly benefit the sex workers.

Chela Sandoval (2012) followed Mohanty to become one of the leading proponents and advocates of black, third world, and postcolonial feminism. She examines the "oppositional consciousness" that exists between the First world feminism, which she labels as hegemonic feminism, and the Third world feminism. Uma Narayan (2009) expands the scholarship on the representation and counter representation. She warns against the pitfalls of answering essentialism with essentialism. She deems cultural essentialism as counterproductive and harmful for the global feminist cause. She champions Mohanty's agenda of situatedness and contextualism to analyze women's subordination. She asserts that the abstract generalization drives the authentic concerns about the women's agency and subjections out of the limelight. Asma Mansoor (2016) examines how the third world feminist discourse employs the theoretical notion and terms borrowed from First world feminism. These derivative terms carry the cultural baggage and further solidify the colonial binarism between First world feminism and the Third world feminism. She stresses the need to radically revise the theoretical notions like 'marginalization'. Mansoor (2016) explicates her attempt at reconfiguring this term in her Third world conceptual mould. She, on the contrary, herself a Third World woman, views herself not as a disempowered margin, rather as a space of agentic reconfiguration, processed by discursive permeability (p. 2). Vanja Floryd (2019) views *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie as a representative work of anglophone Pakistani writings that subscribes to Mohanty's manifesto of counter representation by investing its characters with a greater degree of agency and subjectivity.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Feminist Agency in *Shadow of the Crescent Moon*

Pakistan fiction writers have a knack for delineating agentic feminine individuals who are in control of their bodies and sexuality. Bhutto's debut fiction *Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2015) disrupts the above-discussed homogenized constructions by portraying the

multidimensional and multi-layered nature of women's agency, subjectivity, oppression, and resistance. She replaces a reductive one-dimensional image of women with a pulsating and vibrant portrayal like that of Samarra and Mina from *Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. By staying clear of any essentialist portrayal of its female characters, the novel subscribes to Mohanty's double-edged strategy of "internal critique of hegemonic "Western" feminisms" on one hand and on the other, formulates "autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 51).

Bhutto rebuts a totalized image of "third world" women by positing radical and subversive agency with her female characters. She ably deconstructs and destabilizes the assumptions about Western women's Others. *The Shadow* (2015) establishes itself as the work of a politically conscious author who has exhibited a cognizance of the ethnocentric and colonizing practices. Her approach is one of her interviews resonates with Mohanty: "I also realized that the notion in the West about the status of South Asian women is skewed and that is why millions of South Asian women are reduced to merely one idea" (Bhutto as cited in Banerjee, 2013).

The Shadow (2015), set in war-on-terror-struck tribal regions of Pakistan, relates the story of five young people – two of them women – living in a turbulent world. The novel which at the beginning promises to be the story of three brothers, winds down to the analysis of how Sammara, the female protagonist, forms and exercises her complex and fearless agency in a place where fundamentalists, the state, society, and deeply entrenched patriarchy jostle with each other in complex power relations. She emerges as an extraordinarily powerful, real, quite poised to break stereotypes of homogenization. Sammara, along with the other women of Mir Ali, a town in erstwhile FATA, lies at the epicenter of torment and turbulence caused by Talibanization and the War on Terror. Like the women of Sean O'Casey's plays of war-torn Ireland, they are undaunted in their bond and a sense of ownership to that town while the men around them flee.

Fatima Bhutto's novel is a classic example of Mohanty's call for situatedness as it accords due diligence to the locatedness of spatio-temporal setting. Bhutto delineates violence, seeping fundamentalism, insurgency, sectarian tensions, and its devastating consequences. The surveillance from drones and military presence as a part of the war on terror adds to the complexities of the place, which makes it too risky for a family to be all together in one mosque (Bhutto, 2015, p. 101). The turbulence resulted from the fact that "two aeroplanes hit foreign buildings, this is what people in Mir Ali heard" (Bhutto, 2015, p. 40). The five main characters carve out subjectivities when "betrayal, allegiances, family ties and resilience come head-to-head with love, liberalism, progression and changing ideology" (Sethna, 2014). Sammara's agency is shaped by this particular historical and political praxis.

Bhutto has portrayed Sammara as fiercely autonomous and non-submissive. The seeds of her rebellion lie in her childhood and girlhood. Being the daughter of a dissident Ghazan Afridi, she had caught the wind of dissidence and nonconformity. Samarra liked cricket and horse riding and shooting pellet guns. She mastered driving her father's 150cc bike which he had got smuggled from Kabul. She accompanied her father during the chilliest of winters and

survived on fishing trout. “When Ghazan Afridi went fishing for brown trout in the icy streams of the northern valleys, Samarra held the spotted fish with two fingers hooked into its mouth as it thrashed against the rocks, its gills bursting with fresh air” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 9). When her father brought AK47, she “field-stripped them with her father” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 9). She retained her composure and “walked straight across the gravel with her head held high” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 10). When she was stopped from going to bigger cities for higher education, she did not give up. She started reading second-hand physics, comic books, and Rahman Baba’s poetry. Through her indomitable spirit and resistance, she extracted permission to study at a university in the city close to the tribal areas.

When her father does not return, she helps her mother cope with the loss. In the hue and cry of visiting mourners, she consoles her mother with her resilience. She says to her mother: “Nothing ever happens to the brave” and “[y]ou don’t cry for a man in hiding. You don’t mourn for a man you have not buried” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 25). She refuses to leave her city in turbulent times because she does not like to leave Mir Ali, to walk on the roads that carry no memory of her life (Bhutto, 2015, p. 95). Later on, when she is abandoned by lifelong love-interest in Aman who moves to the US, Samarra grows stronger than ever after Aman’s betrayal: she does not feel dejected, rather she realizes her individuality. She finds an ally in Aman’s younger brother Hayat a separatist, who is in turn fascinated by her courage and sense of initiative. They both are impelled by the convergence of the understanding that “pain is of no consequence when fighting for the collective” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 150).

As Samarra moves towards the final act of subversion, she is invested with ‘white rage’ against the multilayered forces she is faced with. As a fully empowered agentic individual, she has several subject positions available to her. She chooses one at her will. She wields her anger and loss as a weapon for forming an agency that is mired in the situatedness of her experience and socio-political ethics of specificities. There is no singular explanation for what she does at the end. She is impelled by a plethora of motives and factors outside the knowledge framework of western feminist agency and passive formulations about Third World women. She appears as an agentic individual when she proposes to attack the convoy of the visiting CM of KPK. She feels this assault large enough to change everything: “Every security, every informer, every policy will be unmade by it” (Bhutto, 2015, p. 195). The assault is carried out, but it is uncertain if the CM is indeed assassinated or not. Aman discloses his knowledge of Samarra’s activities to the authorities in exchange for a student visa. As a result, Samarra is apprehended and presumably tortured. Thus, Sammara challenges the power hierarchies in her own specific way. She eludes the labels of sexually oppressed/victim women or a brainwashed maniac. Rather, she charts an agentic position that is in line with Spivak’s view of agency which “centres on a politics of decolonization and negotiation with structures of violence” (Parker, 2012, p. 7).

Feminist Agency in *The Miraculous True Story of Nomi Ali*

U. A. Khan’s *The Miraculous True Story of Nomi Ali* (2019) brings to the fore the untold stories of the prisoners incarcerated in British Raj administered Andaman Islands, circa 1936-42. She asserts in the ‘Acknowledgements’ of her novel that “women prisoners were ‘almost entirely written out of history’; they ‘rarely merited even a footnote’ (p. ii). *The Miraculous*

True Story of Nomi Ali (2019) debunks the essentialist and homogenizing construction of South Asian women subjects. It has done so by delineating a range of feminine personae ranging from agentic, passive, resistant, and complicit. Uzma paints striking and extraordinary women assorted from multi-ethnic and multi-religious locations, going beyond the categorization based on homogenization and coherence. The novel features the multiple agencies like that of Nomi, the eponymous 12 years old daughter, a prisoner; the Burmese Aye, an enterprising islander slightly older than Nomi; Nomi's mother Fehmida who is the sole breadwinner of the family due to her husband's inertia; the fascinating Shakuntala, the Indian wife of a former deputy commissioner of the island named Thomas and her docile daughter; and Aunt Hanan.

The eponymous protagonist Nomi is the daughter of a convicted Indian prisoner Haider Ali who was condemned for a minor crime to the dreaded Cellular Jail in Andaman along with his pregnant wife. Nomi and her well-liked older brother Zee were born on the Island like many of their mates like Aye. Their lives are played out in the shadow of the terrible Central Jail in the Andaman. During WWII, the island became a theater of war between two empires, Britain and Japan. As a critic says, "the novel, an archipelago of atrocities (hundreds are pushed off the boats into the sea) during the war, lends human terms to suffering, juxtaposing the beauty of the setting with the brutality of the war" (Agrawal, 2019). Nomi's brother is executed by the Japanese and since then "she had carried the weight to Zee's torture" (Khan, 2019, p. 183). This traumatizes Nomi to the point where she develops temporary dissociative disorder. Nomi experiences barbarism, poverty, deprivation on an unimaginable scale. These experiences diversify the nature of Nomi's agency and subjection.

Throughout the course of the novel, Nomi's paths intersect with those of Prisoner 218D. Uzma explains this intertwining as crucial to the understanding of the narrative. In one of her interviews, she says: "Nomi and the prisoner were a kind of dual compass. The prisoner started the journey to this book. Nomi completed it. Their meeting in the book has special resonance for me" (quoted in Quadri, 2019). This resonance extends itself to the analysis of their respective agencies. The agentic positions and identity formulations of both have uncanny and grim similarities. Nomi can be seen as the Prisoner's younger self or vice versa. Like Nomi, Prisoner had possibly been "the keeper of seas that flowed into each other, into her bowl" (Khan, 2019, p. 15). But, she has chosen to engage herself in decolonization through subversive activities against colonial apparatus within the narrative of the novel. On a discursive level, her potent agency displaces the epistemic colonization of Western Feminism.

Nomi witnesses the Prisoner's arrival on the Island clad in 'the heavy chains around her like a skirt'" (Khan, 2019, p. 20). Nomi instantly notes her resilience and indomitable spirit. Inside the prison, she is the only woman political prisoner. Her sociopolitical agency gains its strength from unshakable faith in her belief: "The opposite of peace is not war. The opposite of peace is inertia" (Khan, 2019, p. 90). She wages a war on her captors with only her body and her memory. Cillian – the terrible jailor "who was born to never die" – subjects her frail body as a testimony to unimaginable monstrosity. After incessant torture throughout the night, "her body hung from all sides, as though it belonged to someone else. And she burned,

inside” (Khan, 2019, p. 130). In the morning, she does the only things she could with her battered body; she joins the hunger strike of other prisoners. Infuriated by this act, Howard, the jailer, tries to force-feed her by holding her jaws open with an iron contraption.

During the Japanese invasion of the Island, Nomi manages to break out and find shelter in a neighboring Island inhabited by aborigines. There, before her violent death, she contemplates the path while hiding in a pit resembling a grave. The novel captures her conditions in this revealing statement: “Yet no space seemed to fit her anymore, which could again cause her to fly out of her burial nest” (Khan, 2019, p. 203). This assertion is the key to properly interpreting her agency. The novel seems to suggest that no essentialist or tailor-made analysis for this particular third-world female subject would suffice. Third-world subjects like her demand a more specified and multivalent analysis which puts to shame the binarist logic of agentic west and passive rest.

CONCLUSION

Bhutto and Khan do not succumb to the reductionist strategy of answering essentialism with essentialism. Literary representations and critique have a tendency of portraying excessively romanticized, essentializing visions of previously silenced or misrepresented women. In order to contest the trope of victimhood, authors bring forth an essentialist vision of third-world-woman-as-authentic-heroine. Resonating with Mohanty’s vision, both have been careful about lapsing into this pitfall. Instead, they have placed their characters with varying agencies into their particular historical political praxis to produce portrayals of agentic individuals who lay claim to their body and sexuality on one hand and debunk west’s essentialism on the other. Bhutto’s female protagonist fighting against all odds including war – which has traditionally been a thoroughly male affair – comes out as an emphatically agentic woman, raising a big question mark against the western trope of eastern woman as submissive passivity to masculine violence. Khan’s presentation of a variety of femininities rooted in their varying ethno-political contexts dismantles the exploitative monolithicity of western representation of eastern women. This study shows that Bhutto and Khan have emerged as strong Pakistani voices for the situated indigenous view of eastern in general and in particular Pakistani woman’s agency.

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