



Subverting Monolithic Representation of Third World Women: A Postcolonial Feminist Study of The Monsoon War

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences, struggles, voice, and agency of women in Bina Shah's novel *The Monsoon War*, employing Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist framework. She critiques the monolithic assumptions (weak, victims, dependent, uneducated) associated with third world women. Secondly, she challenges the otherness and advocate voice, agency and resistance. The study uses textual analysis method to evaluate the stereotypical representation of third world women and their voice and agency through postcolonial feminist perspective. The present study highlights the power of postcolonial feminist literature, enhances its understanding and power to challenge the power dynamics. Furthermore, it elevates the unheard and marginalized voices of women living in third world countries. The findings reveal that Bina Shah has created powerful women who are strong, independent, have resistance power. They exercise their voice and agency to challenge the patriarchy. Hence, the study dismantles the monolithic image of being victims associated with them by the dominant western narratives. It bring out the powerful image of the third world women.



Introduction

Stereotypical Representation of the Third World Women

According to Aschort and Ahluwali (2009) Said examined the Orientalism with the help of close analysis of historical texts found the recurrent ideas and themes about the Orientals. He further revealed that the readers from the west did not have a direct introduction of the Orient rather through the text which is produced by some specific western authors. Kennedy (2000) states that

this leads to the stereotypical image that finds the Occident (west) and the Orient (East) as opposites to one another, often placing the East as weak and inferior.

According to Duijker and Frijda, (1960) cited by Alwana (2024) the term stereotype “refers to a category of people indicating that they are similar/coherent in some ways and thus leading to the formation of generalizations and judgments on them” (1960, p. 115). This concept of stereotype when applied to the women living in third world countries reveal that number of incomplete, imperfect and over generalized portrayals were made for the nonwestern women by some western feminists.

Mohanty (2003) refers to these western stereotypes about nonwestern as a discursive and extended colonial practice. She further maintains that the colonizers used these stereotypes as a justification for their rule over Orients. Kabbani (1986) states that the Oriental women are lowered doubly in the powerful and predetermined discourse of west. They misrepresent and marginalize the women from colonized regions by labelling them as weak and victim. They neither respect nor recognizes the voice and agency of women living in the third world countries. Thus, it leads to the monolithic image of women living in third world countries. However, the female writers from South Asian region are creating the powerful and unconventional characters that reflect the voice, agency and resistance of South Asian women while retaining their social and cultural values.

Fettah and Sandy (2019) states that the issue of representation of third world women is central in postcolonial feminist studies. It focuses on how the women from third world countries are presented in western media, western framework and academic discourse. They are usually represented as weak, victims, voiceless, uneducated and dependent. Thus, create their monolithic image. Moreover, it perpetuates an inferior portrayal of women living in third world countries and treat them as “other”. Tyagi (2014) states that such western centric narrative is often criticized by postcolonial feminists because it erases the diverse socio-political, geographical, religious and cultural background of the non-western women. Ballestrin (2022) maintains that the feminist scholars like Mohanty, critiques the tendency of western feminists to homogenize the varied experiences of third world women and represent them as the women who have no voice and agency and are in need to be rescued by western feminists. Thus, the western feminists represent an untrue portrayal of women living in third world countries. Therefore, the third world feminists including Spivak and Mohanty emphasize on the self-representation, where women from third world countries can articulate their varied experiences so that the solutions could be provided accordingly.

There are various writers from former colonial regions who, through their writings challenge the dominant discourse by providing the real picture of the society the characters belong to. Bina Shah is among one the prominent writers of Pakistan. She is a novelist and short story writer. She has written number of novels including *Before She Sleeps* (2018), *The Monsoon War* (2023) *A Season of Martyrs* (2014), *The 786 Cyber café* (2004), *The Slum Child* (2010) etc. In the present study the researchers attempt to elucidate the voice, agency and resistance power of women from third world country like Pakistan the researchers have selected Shah’s novel *The Monsoon War* (2023)

The selected novel revolves around the female characters like Alia, Commander Fatima Kara and Commander Katy Azadieh. They strive to fight against the cursed tradition of multiple marriages and numerous children. Thus, this research examines the way postcolonial fiction challenge the monolithic assumptions about the women of formerly colonized region and represent their image as the women who either have voice, agency and resistance power or they endeavor to attain it.

Significance of the Study

The present research decenters the western framework that focuses on the experiences of white middle class women only. By focusing on the diverse experiences of women living in third world countries it challenges their homogenous and monolithic portrayal by some western feminists. The present study highlights the capacity of nonwestern women to survive against the violence and injustice. The current study is an addition to the postcolonial feminist studies as it centers the resistance, agency and voices of the women who are doubly marginalized by patriarchy and colonization.

Research Objectives

To evaluate the capacity of characters to subvert the monolithic assumptions associated with the third world women.

To evaluate the ability of third world women to demonstrate their resistance power and their voice and agency in the selected novel.

Research Questions

Q.1 How far the female characters in the selected novel subvert the monolithic assumptions associated with the third world women?

Q.2 How far the female characters in the selected novel exhibit their resistance power and their voice and agency?

Literature Review

Post colonialism

Siddighi & Tafakori (2020) states that the concept of Orientalism given by Said (1978) is considered as the central force which has given place to the postcolonial theory. However, in 1952, Fanon assertively dislocated the biasness against colonized people which was practiced under colonialism. Mishra (2015) states that postcolonial theory subverts the discourse of power. It focuses on the aftermath of colonialism. It is mainly concerned how colonization affected the lives, tradition, culture and religious practices of colonized people. It deals with the issues like identity, diaspora, hybridity and representation. It encourages to question the powerful discourse, to challenge the stereotypes, with a focus on how the people from colonized regions resisted and reclaimed their identity, independence and autonomy. Rana (2021) states that it provides empowerment to the voices which were marginalized by the dominant discourse. Through the literature produced by the colonized people they attempt to create their identity and challenge the otherness.

Feminism

Hazarika (2020) states that the feminists emphasizes on the rights and equality of women. It was originated to challenge such societies that divides the genders culturally, economically and socially. In these societies the position of women is marginalized and subordinated. Therefore, Bala (2019) elucidates that it focuses on the awakening of women so that they may challenge the injustice and create their own identities. Likewise, Jenkins (2019) states that feminism is a social and political movement that seeks to achieve equality between genders. It addresses issues such as gender discrimination, reproductive rights, workplace equality, and violence against women.

Postcolonial Feminism

The postcolonial feminist theory which is an offshoot of post colonialism and feminism. It emerged as a reaction to the mainstream feminism which is influenced by western thoughts and values mainly. According to Feyzi (2021) it is also referred as 'third world feminism'. Kainat (2022) states that the western feminism focuses on the experiences of Europe and American women only. Shashikala (2015) maintains that it leads to criticism that mainstream feminists may not always fully reflect or address the diverse experiences of women in different cultural, social or economic contexts. Thus postcolonial feminism censures the discursive practice of some traditional western feminists.

The postcolonial feminists are mainly concerned with the issue of representation of women living in once colonized regions. Spivak presents her key ideas in her essay, *Can Subaltern Speak?* (1988) in which she introduces the term, Subaltern. It is a marginalized group that lacks voice in dominant discourse. She questions the voice of the subaltern groups; women, tribal people, third world countries, and otherness. She emphasizes on an intersectional approach to understand how class, gender, and race intersect. She criticizes the western feminist narratives that often overlook the unique experiences of women living in third world countries. Likewise, Mohanty has emphasized on the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of experiences and identities of women of varied cultures. She further argues that in the media and academic discourse the issue of representation of third world women should be analyzed in such a way that interrogates the powerful discourse. According to Mohanty, it is crucial to recognize and value the voices of women with different political, regional, cultural and geographical backgrounds living in postcolonial contexts for their true representation.

The Issue of Representation

According to Rajan & Desai (2013) the postcolonial feminists identify the issue of representation of women living in third world countries. The postcolonial feminists have challenged the homogenous representation of third world women by western feminists which leads to the production of their monolithic image. Smith (1993) maintains that the mainstream feminists are unaware of sociopolitical, cultural, religious and geographical diversities of women from third world countries. Therefore, according to Loomba (2015) the western feminists may not be suitable to represent them.

While talking about the status of women living in Pakistan the UN report for the year 2023 reveals that women are residing in a highly regressive and patriarchal societies. It causes gender discrimination and violence against women. Likewise, the findings of Rehab (2024) show that the women from rural areas are burdened doubly. They work in the agriculture fields, raise children and fulfill the responsibilities of household. Whereas, in urban areas women face disparities because they have limited access to socioeconomic opportunities. Such disparities are grounded in their intersectional identities which includes the difference of geographical location, religion, class, access to education and their roles in households like mother, sister, daughter, and daughter in law. It highlights the importance of such feminism that may address the diverse issues of women in the intersectional society like Pakistan. Sulatana and KhushBakhst (2024) elucidating the significance of Aurat March state that instead of ridiculous slogans raised in Aurat March a constructive voice of women should be built with the support of public to eradicate the evils against women. Whereas, Rehab (2024) supports the Aurat march saying that it provides a strong platform for the women so that they may advocate their basic rights.

In Pakistani society women face variety of challenges. Despite these challenges the women writers like Bina Shah highlights the voice, agency and resistance of women in a highly patriarchal society of Pakistan. In her work, *The Monsoon war*, an exceptional form of activism is present. It challenges the traditional patriarchies and the dominant discourse of west that marginalize and snatch the voice, agency and resistance power of women.

Otherness

Crenshaw (1989) states that the roots of Otherness can be traced back to the time of imperialism. Women of the colonized regions were represented as oppressed whereas, the women from western regions were represented as liberal and superior. Mohanty (2003) identifies the western feminists' treatment of the third world women. She calls it a discursive practice that treat the third world women as "other". It snatches the possibility of the voice, agency and resistance power of women operating in third world countries. Spivek (1988) in her conceptual work, *Can Subaltern Speak?* refers it as epistemic violence. She uses this term to explain how the western discourse silence the voices of women from colonized regions by imposing their framework that cannot evaluates the experiences of the third world women appropriately. In addition, she raises a crucial question that can the colonized women speak for themselves in a framework that is designed to exclude her. Mohanty (2003) argues that instead of placing the western feminists as the saviors of nonwestern women there should be a transnational feminist approach that should respect and recognize the diverse voices of women across the world.

Theoretical Framework & Research Methodology

The present study incorporates the theoretical concepts of Chandra Talpade Mohanty which she mentions in her book, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003). Mohanty (2003) in her theory has critically examined how third world women are portrayed in both western media and academic discourse. She critiques the way western feminism often portray third world women as homogenous and oppressed group which create their misrepresented, stereotypical 'monolithic image' without considering their diversity. This "Eurocentric" mode of analysis that seizes the possibility of their resistance power, their agency and voice is criticized by her (p. 33-34). Mohanty challenges this misrepresentation and argues that the lack of contextual understanding and labialization of western feminists is an extended colonial practice that creates the third world women "other".

She laid the foundation to observe, understand and respect the socio-political, cultural and geographical dissimilarities, so that othering can be erased and resistance power, agency and voice of women should be respected which will ultimately lead to the true representation of third world women. Thus, Mohanty advocates /represents third world women as strong, educated and independent women. She challenges the otherness of the third world women. She highlights/advocates the resistance power, voice and agency of third world women. The present study focuses on the significant features of Mohanty's postcolonial feminist theory. Firstly, Mohanty in her theory subverts the monolithic assumptions (weak, victims, dependent, uneducated) associated with third world women. Secondly, she challenges the Otherness by advocating voice, agency and resistance of women living in third world countries. There are various research scholars who have employed Mohanty's theory as the framework for their studies. Barfi et al. (2015) studied the novel, *Joys of the Motherhood* (1979) by a Nigerian novelist, Buchi Emecheta. He found that the lead character Akanwo, is a proud woman who possesses male power and challenge the norms and values of patriarchy. Likewise, Shashikala (2015) did her doctoral studies. Her findings reveal that the characters defy the homogeneity assigned to their regional identities and they establish their heterogeneous identity and autonomy.

The current study has used Belsey's (2013) model of textual analysis to explore and interpret the selected novel. According to Mckee (2003), "text is all about making sense" (p. 4). Whereas, for Belsey (2013) "Textual analysis produces such interpretations which are most probable in a given cultural context" (p. 160). She further notes that there is no such thing as 'pure' reading and interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge, some of it being general cultural knowledge. There are various steps as suggested by Belsey for the textual analysis. The first step consists of the close reading of the text to understand its depth and to understand the important ideas, concepts, content, purpose and central theme of the text. In the second step the focus is on the contextual information which refers to the background, circumstances and surroundings of the events in the text. The final step involves the deconstruction of the text. It explores the layers of meaning and ambiguities within the text to reveal how meaning is not fixed and constantly shifting.

The present study combines the theoretical concepts by Mohanty with the textual analysis method. For a comprehensive understanding of how Shah's novel, *The Monsoon War*, addresses the intricacies of challenges, voices, agency and resistance involved in the lives of third world women and their representation in postcolonial context.

In her novel, *The Monsoon War*, Shah represents and portrays the limitations faced by the characters, as well as the potential for alternative modes of expression and resistance, through the portrayal of Katy Azadieh, Alia and Fatima Kara. It offers insights into the complexities of cultural and social power dynamics, shedding light on the struggles, resilience, and possibilities for agency among marginalized communities. Moreover, this study contributes to the broader discourse by providing the true representation and empowerment to the assumed weak and marginalized voices of women living in third world postcolonial context. In addition, it provides the subtle understanding of how fiction can be a tool to amplify the perspectives of marginalized women.

Literature review demonstrates that there are number of researches done on the selected topic that cover various themes like crisis, sufferings and subjugation of women etc. in the postcolonial context. However, the selected novel is the recent one therefore, the researchers could not found any research done on it previously. Furthermore, the present study retains hope to provide an extensive image of women from the third world countries.

In addition, the postcolonial feminist theory of Mohanty is appropriate for the present study as it examines the power dynamics, challenge and subvert the monolithic assumptions, representation, the voices and resistance power of the women living in postcolonial third world countries.

Analysis and Discussion

In the following section, the researcher presents various themes that are extracted after the analysis of the selected novel.

Subverting the Monolithic Assumptions (weak, uneducated, dependent)

Representation of women as strong and independent individuals

The themes presented below redefine the roles of women in postcolonial contexts. The women in the selected novels challenge the stereotypical representation and reclaim their voice and agency through vigorous resistance the protagonist Commander Katy Azadieh In the novel, *The Monsoon War*, is introduced as the "restless, shiftless, free-willed and untamable" (Shah, 2023, p. 57).

Her introduction sets the stage for a character who is strong-headed, highly trained, and intelligent officer. The descriptors “restless” and “shiftless” suggest a refusal to conform to the norms of society and expectations imposed on women. Commander Katy’s characterization indicates a strong defiance of these norms. The women such as Commander Fatima Kara and Katy Azadieh in the novel are depicted by Shah as physically fit and emotionally strong women. Further, in *The Monsoon War*, there is a group of fifty women who are independent and assertive. The group is named as Hamiyat, The group members have received military training. They live in mountains and save the other women from domestic violence. “*The women fighters from insurgency morphed into Hamiyat, they patrolled the mountains and protected the women of the village from domestic violence, provided women with safe places to stay. The village men were too battered, to fight against them*” (Shah, 2023, p. 122)

The Hamiyat is a protective force for the women. It illustrates how women in postcolonial contexts can challenge and redefine their roles in patriarchal structures. These women fighters take an active role in reshaping their narrative and reclaiming power over their lives. The illustrations mentioned above shows the contrast with the belief of western feminists that women in the third world are all dependent and weak and have no ability to decide about their life. They take on roles that subvert the traditional gender expectations and protect the vulnerable members of their community.

The story revolves around Katy Azadieh, Fatima Kara and Aalia; they all are the members of Hamiyat. These female insurgents are portrayed as protectors and helpers. “*They fight against rape gangs during the time of war and chaos. The Hamiyats are defending women by saving them from violence and tradition of multiple marriages*” (Shah, 2023, p. 33).

Their powerful actions reveal how women challenge their realities. In addition, importance of understanding women’s experiences as deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts is emphasized. The Hamiyat’s women are not merely victims; they strongly resist oppression. Hence, it challenges the stereotypical portrayals of women as passive and weak, instead they are presented as active agents in their fight for safety and justice. The above discussion aligns with Mohanty’s idea that history is replete with the brave women who strongly fought for their family’s wellbeing and that their struggles are deeply influenced by their socio-political environments.

The Monsoon War, Shah has depicted women who are at the next level in terms of education and technology.

“*Fatima Kara gives the light bulbs to Lateefa and tells her to distribute them to Ababeels. Soon, an LED bulb is fixed in every house and is connected to the spectrum, now the Hamiyat and the Ababeels can talk to one another without being intercepted by the collectors*” (Shah, 2023, p. 123)

The text shows a shift in communication which is facilitated by technology. It was previously controlled by patriarchal authorities (e.g. the mention of collectors). Ababeels (the group of women spies) and the Hamiyat (the group of resistant women) can communicate without fear of interruption of external powers. It symbolizes women’s growing autonomy in terms of access to information. In addition, Katy Azadieh, Rana Abdullah and Fatima Kara portrayed as highly intellectual and can operate Hi-Tech tools. The above analysis reveals that the Pakistani fiction writers depict such a powerful female characters that are educated, energetic and risk takers.

The Dissimilarity of Third World Women from their Western Counterparts

For the true representation and subversion of monolithic assumptions associated with third world women it is important to increase the understanding about the multi layers of oppression and complexity involved in the lives of women living in third world countries.

In the novel Aalia is shown as an important character in the novel. She along with many other women of the town do not run away from her familial duties. *“Aalia is the meticulous representation of women. She cooks for her family, shows affection to her children and wants to raise them as a strong and useful individuals of society”* (Shah, 2023, p. 12).

It suggests that women from the third world like to make food for their family. Aalia fulfils her family responsibilities and through her cooking skills she is able to create moments of joy in the family. She does not run away from her familial responsibilities. Instead she wants that such a world should be created for her daughters where they can live happily and safely.

Exercise of Resistance, Voice and Agency

The female characters in the selected novel are capable enough to act independently and defy external force that seeks to control them. The characters are depicted as active agents, show resistance by speaking out and reclaiming their voices. In the novel, Shah depicts agency and resistance one step ahead. The female revolutionaries have taken arms against the cursed traditions of multiple marriages of women and numerous children. They challenge the narrative that define them weak with no agency and voice. *“The women ran away after beating him to death., Katy thinks they sound brave in their own way. Their ways may be different from what Hamiyat do, yet they are still designed to subvert and resist”* (Shah, 2023, p. 100).

The act of the women beating a man serves as a symbol of resistance against violence. Their action represents a radical reclaiming of agency. It further illustrates a wretched response to subjugation. Thus, the agency, resistance and voice, the important aspects of Mohanty's (2003) feminist theory, are reclaimed by the female characters in the selected novel.

Discussion

The findings reveal the lives of the female characters living in diverse circumstances. These women face multiple layers of oppression and the barriers to their empowerment are rooted in both local and global power dynamic that result in suppressing their opportunities to flourish. Yet, they are defined with unique characteristics that inspite of challenges they face, they are portrayed as strong, independent, educated and empowered women. It reveals their capacity to develop and to bring improvement in their lives. Hence, they subvert the monolithic assumptions of being weak, dependent and uneducated. Instead they are depicted as strong, independent, risk takers, strugglers and survivors. Kainat (2022) states that the mainstream feminism faces criticism because it focuses on the middle class white women and neglecting the experiences of women from non-western regions.

Therefore, the writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Monica Ali, Sara Suleri, Bina Shah, Ru Freeman and many others depicted the native women along with their circumstances. The current study portrays the diverse contexts of characters. They face the new challenges and illustrate their agency. They highlight their empowerment across their diverse backgrounds. This helped in representing the true portrayal of women. Hence, the findings and discussion support the postcolonial feminist thoughts of Mohanty.

Conclusion

The current study employed the Mohanty's concept of postcolonial feminism to evaluate the novel, *The Monsoon War*. The findings show that the female characters of the selected novel challenge the western feminists' ways of representing the third world women. Through the characters of Fatima Kara, Katy, Rana Abdullah etc. the text encounters the monolithic and stereotypical image of the nonwestern women. The mentioned instances subvert the popular description of some western feminists that all third world women are victims without considering the factors like geography, culture, and history, diversity of issues and diversity of solutions to their issues. The data reveals that the women in the novel wage a war against the system that supports the polyandry and numerous children. The Hamiyats want to create such a world for the women where they can live freely and spend their lives according to their wishes. Moreover, the data shows that the women in the south Asian third world countries are misrepresented by some western feminists. It provides the image of third world women as the women with voice and agency. They have the power to resist the injustice and have capacity to survive the most difficult situations in their lives. Therefore, the research contends the homogenizing tendencies of western feminists. The protagonists Fatima Kara and Katy Azadieh are the women from the third world who disassemble the western feminist's ways of representing the monolithic image of third world women. In fact, they share common struggle and breakaway the shackles of patriarchy and constantly endeavor to bring improvement in their lives.

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