

Navigating the Female agency of the Third world woman between Western interventionism and Local Patriarchal Norms in Waldman' *SA Door in the Earth*

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Abstract



The present study is aimed to examine the female agency of the Third world woman between the Western interventionism and local patriarchal norms of the third world woman in Waldman' s novel A Door in the Earth . The character of Parveen is dual agent between the patriarchal dominance against woman in Afghanistan and the Western interventional structures and norms of the America against Third World and its women. Parveen was born in Afghanistan and brought up in America but later on she moves to study the plight of women in Afghanistan. The theoretical insights for the present study had been taken from Mohanty's (1988) "Under Western Eyes", which argues "Third World woman" as a universally oppressed. The findings of the study reveal that the Third World woman is not only oppressed by the patriarchal norms of the third world but by the interventionist norms of the West as well. In this way, third world woman is doubly oppressed. By interrogating the savior narrative and the internal gendered hierarchies, the study argues that A Door in the Earth, challenges the dominant discourses of liberation and oppression and how agency can be negotiated within and beyond these structures.

Keywords: Female Agency, Third World Woman, Western Intervention, Patriarchal Norms.

Introduction

The Western academic and representational discourse has presented the woman of the Third World as oppressed by the patriarchal norms. In comparison to such discourses the western woman has been portrayed as autonomous and librated one. Similarly, the feminist stance of the Western World had always labeled patriarchal norms of the third world as sole responsible to the oppression of the third world woman. The western feminist calling it a universal civilization had always urged to raise a voice for the rights of the Third World woman by trying to save and rescue the Third World woman from the atrocities the brown man (Cooke, 2002). In such an attempt the Western media and intellectuals had attempted to understand and address the issues of the third world women according to their own western referential models and consequently misrepresented the Third World woman. Hence the interventionist approach of the Western world towards the Third World and the woman proved as a source of oppression as well. Political, cultural and ideological differences proved as a standing mark for such misrepresentation and oppression. It is more like an argumentum ad antiquitatem fallacy that the west instead of rescuing the woman of the third world becomes a source of oppression and misrepresentation. Feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (1988) have critiqued the homogenization of "Third World women" in Western Feminist narratives, which often depict them as passive victims in need of rescue. Similarly, Spivak's (1988) seminal work on the "subaltern" highlights how colonial and neo-colonial interventions silence the voices of women under the guise of liberation. Amy Waldman's novel *A Door in the Earth* (2019) engages with such tensions by portraying Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape through the mediated expression of Crane as representational one of the West and Parveen as the experiential one of the East. Waldman engages the readers with a plenty of characters struggling against the competing forces of Western humanitarianism and entrenched local gendered hierarchies in her novel *A Door in the Earth*.

The novel critically examines how Western interventionism, often framed as a feminist endeavor, paradoxically reinforces imperial power structures while failing to recognize the

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complexities of local contexts. At the same time, it exposes the ways in which patriarchal traditions constrain women's autonomy, yet are often misrepresented in reductive Orientalist terms (Said, 1978). Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) have urged for a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's lives, one that neither essentializes their oppression nor denies their capacity for resistance within their own cultural frameworks. Waldman's novel aligns with this critical perspective, challenging both the savior complex of foreign aid workers and the rigid gendered structures embedded in Afghan society.

This study deconstructs the ideological binaries that have historically framed Third World women's agency either as victims of their own cultures or as beneficiaries of Western intervention. By presenting Parveen-the protagonist- caught between these conflicting forces, Waldman reveals how female agency is neither static nor monolithic but a site of negotiation, resistance, and adaptation. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, this study explores how the novel complicates conventional narratives of liberation and oppression, ultimately questioning who has the authority to define and advocate for women's rights for the third world women.

Research Questions

1. How does *A Door in the Earth* deconstruct the ideological binaries of Western interventionist feminism and local patriarchal norms in shaping the agency of Third World women?
2. In what ways does Amy Waldman's portrayal of Parveen's experiences challenge dominant narratives of victimhood and empowerment in postcolonial feminist discourse?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to ongoing debates in postcolonial feminism, particularly regarding the representation of Third World women's agency within intersecting structures of Western intervention and local patriarchy. By analyzing *A Door in the Earth* through a deconstructive lens, this research challenges the dominant binaries of liberation and oppression that often frame discussions about the women of the third world.

Literature Review

Postcolonial feminist theory challenges the ways in which Western Feminism has historically depicted Third World women as passive victims in need of rescue. Mohanty's (1988) seminal essay, *Under Western Eyes*, critiques the homogenization of non-Western women in Western feminist scholarship, arguing that such narratives erase historical and cultural specificities. By constructing an imagined category of the "Oppressed Third World woman," Western feminists reinforce colonial binaries of the civilized rescuer (The west) and the subjugated and rescued object (The East). Such binary provides the western as a position of the "subject" and the Eastern as a position of the "object". This binary imagines the "universal subalterns". This aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, where she highlights how Western discourses often silence the very women they claim to empower, speaking on their behalf rather than allowing their voices to emerge.

Similarly, Leila Ahmed (1992) explores how "colonial feminism" has been historically used to justify imperial interventions. She argues that colonial powers, under the guise of liberating women, imposed Western norms that disregarded local agency and cultural contexts. Abu-Lughod (2013) extends this critique in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, where she examines how contemporary humanitarian discourse continues to frame Muslim women as subjects of oppression, reinforcing the same colonial logics. These critiques provide a crucial foundation for understanding how Western interventions have shaped the discourse on Third World women's agency.

The Savior Complex and the Limits of Humanitarian Feminism

The humanitarian-industrial complex (Yes, when humanitarian project acts as industry) plays a significant role in the Western perception of Third World women's agency. NGOs, development agencies, and international aid organizations frequently present themselves as neutral forces of progress, yet scholars have demonstrated that these institutions often reinforce global power hierarchies. Kapoor (2008) is of the view that the discourse of development is a form of "neoliberal governmentality and mentality," where aid programs discipline and regulate local populations rather than genuinely empowering them. Similarly, Hunt (2008) argues that humanitarian narratives construct the third world as a site of crisis, necessitating foreign intervention to "save" women from their own cultures.

Kumar (2018) highlights how humanitarian narrative frequently commodifies the suffering of non-Western women, transforming them into spectacles for Western audiences. This is evident in the

proliferation of memoirs, documentaries, and NGO campaigns that depict women in war torn or underdeveloped regions as voiceless figures awaiting Western salvation. Such representations, Kumar argues, not only reinforce Western superiority but also obscure the structural causes of gendered oppression, which are often linked to global capitalism, militarization, and geopolitical interests.

Local Patriarchies and the Complexities of Indigenous Agency

While postcolonial feminists critique Western interventionist feminism, they also recognize that indigenous patriarchal structures impose significant constraints on women's autonomy. Kandiyoti (1988) presented the fascinating concept of the "patriarchal bargain" which explains how women in patriarchal societies navigate systems of oppression through strategic compromises. Rather than being entirely passive or wholly resistant, women often negotiate their agency within the constraints of familial, religious, and socio political norms. In the context of Muslim majority societies, Mahmood (2005) challenges Western liberal feminist assumptions that agency must always take the form of resistance. In *Politics of Piety*, she argues that women's engagement with religious and cultural traditions can itself be a form of agency, rather than simply a sign of submission. Mahmood's work complicates the binary of oppression and empowerment, showing that women's choices must be understood within their specific historical and cultural contexts.

Kandiyoti (2007) and Billaud (2015) further explore the ways in which local gender norms intersect with global politics, particularly in post war and conflict affected societies. These studies reveal that patriarchal structures are not static but evolve in response to broader socio-political changes. In many cases, Western interventions disrupt traditional gender dynamics in ways that are not always beneficial to women, leading to unintended consequences such as increased gender based violence or the reinforcement of conservative social norms.

Towards a Nuanced Understanding of Female Agency

A key issue in postcolonial feminist discourse is the need to move beyond simplistic narratives of oppression and liberation. Mohanty (2003) argues for a "transnational feminism" that acknowledges both the structural inequalities that affect women globally and the ways in which women exercise agency within their own contexts is indeed a need of the time. Abu-Lughod (2013) similarly calls for a more situated analysis of women's struggles, one that does not impose Western ideals of freedom and autonomy onto non-Western societies. By engaging with these debates, this study highlights the limitations of both Western interventionist feminism and local patriarchal constraints in defining women's agency.

Theoretical frame work

This study is qualitative in nature. The major theoretical insights have been taken from the Mohanty's *Under the Westernized Eye*. Mohanty is of the view that the woman of the third world is double colonized. On the one side she is subject to the patriarchal norms of the third world while on the other hand she is subject to the triggers of the feminist stances of the western feminism. The movement of western feminism acts likewise of patriarchy to the women of the third world. The traditional focus on resistance often stems from the broader postcolonial and feminist discourses that emphasize opposition to hegemony. However, this focus risks creating a reductive dichotomy in which resistance is the only pathway to agency. As Mohanty notes, such frameworks often ignore the subtle, context-specific practices through which individuals and communities assert their autonomy. Negotiation, in contrast, involves strategic engagement with power, where individuals navigate constraints while finding ways to survive, adapt, and reshape their conditions. This nuanced form of agency reflects what Michel de Certeau describes as "tactics," or everyday practices through which individuals operate within dominant structures to carve out spaces of autonomy (de Certeau, 1984).

By integrating negotiation into the theoretical framework of agency, Mohanty provides a critical lens through which to analyze power and resistance. This expanded view not only deconstructs binary oppositions but also opens up space for recognizing diverse forms of agency that might otherwise be overlooked. In doing so, it challenges researchers and theorists to account for the complex, multifaceted ways in which individuals and communities navigate power structures. Mohanty's insights, therefore, serve as a powerful reminder of the need to attend to the nuanced and context specific practices that define human engagement with power.

Data Analysis

A Door in the Earth by Amy Waldman is a critical novel with its setting in America and Afghanistan at the same time. Waldman tactfully selected the two characters i.e. Crane and Parveen around whom

the major plot of the novel revolves. Crane-being an American and a mouth piece version of the West presented Afghanistan and situation of its women in his memoir *Mother Afghanistan* according to the perceptions of the West. He portrays the situation of transportation and resistance of the Afghani people against development and confirms that Afghanistan is underdeveloped because of its orthodox people connected to religious and cultural ideology and their strict religious hatred towards the westerns who are actually the saviors of the Afghanistan. He presents the miserable situation of Freshta's death during labor in the hospital while carrying her on donkey. Then he recounted the story of his kidnapping by local Taliban commander Ammanullah for the treatment of the eyes of his wife. Another relevant event which he describes is the construction of hospital in the village in which he recounts that how they had been bringing the wooden lags through river to the hospital. But all his stories mentioned in his memoir *The Mother Afghanistan* were fabricated one. The very foundational narrative on which Crane develops the argument of his memoir the *Mother Afghanistan* is the story of Freshta- the wife of Waheed was itself more than the imagined ones. As per details of the story, Freshta was pregnant. The village in which she used to live was not having any medical facility. There was no transportation system in the village so he along with her husband Waheed brought Freshta to hospital in the city on donkey. As there was no specialist doctor in that hospital, so Freshta died during labor. Using this humanitarian sentiment he plans to establish a hospital on the name of Freshta in the village. In the story of Freshta, the death of Freshta has been used as central factor of exploitation in shadow of empathy. What more can be adverse than misusing the death of any one. The story of the dying Freshta moves to every reader of the memoir the *Mother Afghanistan*. Among such readers was Parveen. She was fascinated by Crane's act of saving woman in Afghanistan. She was so impressed by his eloquent speeches and claims in the book that she leaves her home in America and moves to see real Afghanistan by her own eyes. She wanted to meet the women in Afghanistan. She wanted to see by her own eyes what Crane had done for the women in Afghanistan. She was curious to know all about Afghanistan. Though she was born in Afghanistan but she was brought up in America as her family moved to America as war torn refugees. It is not only the case of her fascination but everyone who read the story of Freshta's death got sad in America. Everyone from kids to adults, man and women, religious and businessmen were moved by this story, felt sad and donated a lot of money for the development projects in Afghanistan especially the clinic against the name of Freshta.

But then she went into labor, and in labor she began to struggle, as do so many Afghan women, especially rural ones. Most Afghan women, however, do not have an American doctor at hand. True, Crane was an ophthalmologist, not an obstetrician, but he knew far more than the "ignorant crone" who served as the village's traditional birth attendant. So there was hope, or there should have been. But Waheed said he needed the mullah's permission for Crane, as a foreign man, to help his wife, and the mullah refused. Crane pressed Waheed to let him help anyway, but Waheed wouldn't allow him to. Whatever happened, he said, would be God's will. All Crane could do was try to get Fereshta to a hospital with a female doctor, but there was no car or truck to carry her there. Desperate, Crane put her atop the donkey he had ridden into the village. A donkey! Parveen read on. Her spirits lifted when Fereshta arrived with Crane and Waheed at the district hospital, then sank when Crane discovered no female doctor there either. But the male doctor at least was not a foreigner, and Waheed agreed to let him help. I paced around the outside of the small hospital, Crane wrote, as goats nibbled from trash heaps threaded with medical waste. Her screams came out the windows, tore me apart. I stretched myself on the ground, spread my arms wide, and asked God to take me instead. As I prayed, the screams ceased abruptly. I thanked God; the baby had been safely born. Then a bay, a single extended unearthly note that still echoes in my ears, broke the silence. (*A Door in the Earth*, p. 23)

But her arrival in Afghanistan and talking with the family members including her husband and sister, Parveen realizes that the story of Freshta's death was fabricated one. She died but not in hospital according to her family. But on projecting her death on self perceived exaggerations Crane had collected a lot of amount from Americans on the account of rescuing women in Afghanistan and earned personal fame. This shakes her trust which she had developed on Crane after reading the *Mother Afghanistan*. She also feels pity on the American people who had contributed to Crane on the

name of humanitarian development in Afghanistan. Crane by misrepresenting the facts had claimed a lot while did nothing for the people of Afghanistan.

Church groups, book groups, moms' groups, youth groups all had been moved to raise money to support the clinic Crane had built in Fereshta's village. A fourteen year old girl in New Jersey started a fund raising initiative called Money for Mothers that spread first to other schools and then, via social media, to other states. Kids across the country held bake sales and dance-offs; they mowed lawns and tithed from their allowances to help women in Afghanistan. Gideon Crane's book signings drew long lines; his lectures, crowds. For the American people, so many emotions had been pent up since 2001: anger at the attacks, concern for the fate of women in Afghanistan, guilt about the volunteer soldiers deployed and killed, confusion about why they were still in the country at all (*A Door in the Earth*, p.25)

While Parveen the protagonist of the novel basically acts as a double edge character. She speaks the dual narrative and is the best example of female agency who acts as mediator between two extreme points i.e. prevailing patriarchal norms of Afghanistan and the Western interventionist agenda of imperialism. She was born up in Afghanistan but brought up in America is what makes her as the authentic narrator and insider. Though she is fascinated by Crane's constructed and projected the situation of Afghanistan and the dying women in Afghanistan in his memoir the *Mother Afghanistan* but she debunks what had been represented by Crane. She not only saw the real Afghanistan but also realized the adversities caused by America through which men and women of Afghanistan were passing. In her this sense of curiosity and intention of rescue to save the women in Afghanistan she not only travels to Afghanistan but also lives with them, talk with them and helps in rescuing women in Afghanistan. She wishes to see the real Afghanistan by her own eyes and wanted to help the women from patriarchal norms in which she remains successful as well contrary to Crane.

By the time *Mother Afghanistan* caught Parveen's attention, she was a senior at UC Berkeley, and the book had been on the paperback bestseller list for three years. She'd seen many references to it, of course it would've been almost impossible not to but she assumed it was yet another attempt to capitalize on Americans' hunger for information about a country that was newly, dangerously relevant to them. In the more than seven years since the September 11 attacks, the academic tomes about Afghanistan had been supplemented with a host of memoirs about the country Westerners who'd founded women's secret sewing circles or started beauty schools or served as soldiers or CIA officers or reporters, many of them acting as if they'd discovered Afghanistan the way Columbus had discovered America. She'd read none of these books and dismissed them all. (*A Door in the Earth*, p.29)

The clinic which he (Crane) had built in Afghanistan was without medicine. Dr Yasmeen though used to visit clinic but once in a week. Dai who used to help the women during labor for exchange of money openly claims in conversation with Parveen that show me any woman whose life was saved by this clinic. The clinic was used more a place to have an eye on the local people of Afghanistan. Crane was having contacts with CIA agents in Afghanistan i.e. Colonel Trotter. While in real sense Crane's project of humanitarianism was having political purposes which the common men and women in Afghanistan did not know. She realizes that the third world women are not only subject to the patriarchy of the men of the third world but also subject to the misrepresentation of the west as well. Comparing the representation of women in the memoir *The Mother Afghanistan* what Crane had represented and what actually she found in was different. Parveen and the readers simultaneously realize that negative representation of someone is more adverse to the real hardships which people were facing in Afghanistan.

The cover showed a photograph of a woman with dewy dark eyes, most of her hair hidden under a black head scarf, this image superimposed over the country's leaf like shape. But the description on the back gave Parveen an unexpected twinge. Gideon Crane, it said, "had fallen in love with Afghanistan." (*A Door in the Earth*, p.29)

Parveen see that the Afghanistan is not as bad as it has been represented. Even the male members are not as bad as they have been represented in the memoir *The Mother Afghanistan*. Similarly the backwardness in Afghanistan is not only due to the patriarchic norms but also because of the constant intervention of American in Afghanistan against Soviet Union in Afghanistan and in war on terror. The women in Afghanistan are in the plighted situation because of these both ends i.e. western intervention on one side and patriarchy on the other side. As represented by the west only

patriarchy is not responsible for the worsened condition of the women. Above all more adverse to patriarchy and imperial intervention is the negative representation as Crane did in his memoir in *The Mother Afghanistan*. The character of Waheed has been presented strict to woman. But Parveen had never seen him mistreating the women in his family. The character of mullah has been represented negatively but no one in the town complained against him. While at the same time the characters like Sheer Mohammad are present in Afghanistan who actually harasses Parveen on her way to the river.

The most striking trait of Parveen's character in the novel is her agency which she uses to save the women of Afghanistan. Throughout the course of the plot she remains in Afghanistan until she rescues a woman on her way back to America. She had been fighting with the patriarchal heads i.e. Waheed, Mullah Pundits i.e. commander Ammanullah, religious orthodoxy and illiteracy. She has constantly talking on the issues of women in Afghanistan. She had talked every time with women from Dai to Dr Yasmeen. She has known the real histories of women from marriages to milking the cows. By the end of the novel, Parveen was able to bring Shokoh a pregnant woman from Afghanistan to America on the helicopter of CIA. The CIA Agents consistently resist her but she ultimately succeeds in her mission. So she acts as a navigating catalyst between the West and the patriarchal norms of the East. Waheed by the end agrees to send his wife for treatment in America on American helicopter. Parveen proves the claim that Americans are not as loyal and sincere in their project of humanity as they had pretended and at the same time Afghani men are not as strict as they are portrayed.

In her professor's eyes, Parveen would be no different than the missionaries trying to save Muslim souls or the American soldiers using their concern for Muslim women as a pretext for killing or occupation. No different than Crane, who had made an Afghan woman's life his bestseller material? Professor Banerjee would disdain the very act of asking the Americans to save a woman. (297)

When the other significant contribution of Parveen is to fight for the cause of Afghani women in her this attempt is to resist the arrogant imperial intentions. Colonel Trotter represents the imperial orthodoxy and arrogance. He says that I am only authorized to rescue the American. It seems he that he considers only the American as human. The rest may be whatever else but not the human at least.

"I'm authorized to take Americans."

"Aren't you in Afghanistan to save women? Isn't that why you're paving the road?"

Right here is a woman who needs saving."(294)

This is the difference which puts a standing mark between imperial intervention and humanitarian approach towards the marginalized of the war and women in the third world. The female agency of Parveen proved it true what the project of empire could not do at all.

Conclusion

To the conclusion, we find it very interesting that the women of the third world are subject to misrepresentation by the western feminist stances. Crane seems to do the business of his own fame on the name of women in Afghanistan. While the situation of women remains the same in Afghanistan. Even the clinic built by him was not having any medicine and facilitation in the village. There was a single doctor in the village and she with her son is unfortunately killed by the Americans in a combat against the insurgents. While on the other hand, Parveen uses her agency on two ends. On one side colonel Trotter says that I am only authorized to take the Americans only on my helicopter and I am only to rescue the Americans. While on the other hand, she was to convince Waheed and all other people of Afghanistan for the treatment of Shokoh in America. By the end of the novel, she remains successful in her mission to rescue a woman on American helicopter from Afghanistan. We see Crane had claimed more in his book than what he did for the women in Afghanistan. He painted a picture of pregnant dying woman carried to hospital on donkey in Afghanistan and in return he collected money from every section of American society, represented himself as a sacrificial hero, earned million views on Ted talks and acted as CIA agent in Afghanistan. As Waheed permits his wife to be moved to America on American helicopter with Parveen reveals that the Afghani society is not as patriarchal as Crane had perceived and projected in his memoir *The Mother Afghanistan*. No one is so patriarchal that he does not want education, good health facilities for his women and family. The patriarchy is one of the conditioned artifacts of denied access to education and modernity.

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