

## Western Feminism, Subalternity and Portrayal of Muslim Woman: Selected Cultural Production in Focus

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### ABSTRACT

*This study uses Catherine Belsey's textual analysis to study Atiq Rahimi's The Patience Stone in a bid to highlight the status of the woman in the East. The strategic essentialism that is advocated by the Western frameworks of Feminism have already been termed by Gayatri Spivak as instances of epistemic violence. Western framework and parameters of the women rights are not universally applicable and their implementation in the Eastern, third world countries has been a neo-colonial strategy to achieve colonial purposes. This kind of feminism adds to the misery and marginalization of the third world subaltern women. By means of carrying out the textual analysis of the selected literary text, the researchers explore the instances in the text where the colonial interests are closely but clandestinely linked to the feminist concerns promulgated in the novel. This western feminist politics and its negative consequences for subaltern women have been explored in this research, using Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Moreover, Lisa Lau's theory of re-orientalism and the theory of New-Historicism has been used as a supporting lens.*

*Keywords: Subaltern, Postcolonialism, New-Historicism, Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, Epistemic Violence, Re-Orientalism, Orientalism, Dependence, Affiliations.*

### Introduction to the Study

Although colonialism may have ended, yet the effects of imperialism still live on in various manifestations in the once colonized nations across the globe. The imperial reminiscences imply that though a nation may have attained geographical liberation from a foreign rule, yet within its schema their runs the imperialist blood that prevents the people from being truly free. Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* novel The novel is set in a room somewhere (place unmentioned) in Afghanistan during the time when

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Soviet-Afghan war had just ended. Amidst the aftershocks of war, a young woman is living with her husband and two daughters. Her husband is a *mujahid* who has been shot in the neck during a fight with his own fellow *mujahidin* and is comatose. The woman takes care of her husband very devotedly in the start but gradually gets exhausted and starts complaining fiercely about the past atrocious behavior of her husband towards her. She narrates how he used to beat her for no reasons and how he neglected her and her children for jihad. Then she becomes more emotional remembering her miserable life and starts to reveal the dark secrets and emotions to him that she had always kept buried deep in her heart. Though her paralyzed husband cannot move, she is sure that he can listen. So, she makes him listen, like a patience stone or "*sang-e-saboo*. Subsequently, she discloses the shocking revelations that are intensely in conflict with the notions of honor and chastity. She tells him that he is not the father of their two daughters because he was infertile but he and his family, considering her infertile, cursed her for not giving him children. Afraid of her husband's second marriage she slept secretly with another man to get pregnant. She curses him from every angle and at the end after all those shocking revelations, the man miraculously recovers from coma, attacks the woman and during a fatal scuffle both kill each other. Overall, this novel is a strong representation and critique of the miserable life of Afghan women who have no rights and are forced to suffer submissively under the cruel patriarchal authority in the Afghan society.

The design of this study is qualitative because the novel has been discussed descriptively from the perspective of the researcher while taking help from social theories of famous theorists and literary figures. The methods that have been used are textual and contextual analysis of the selected text. For the textual analysis the text of the novel has been examined to find out the instances where the writer can be seen, unnaturally criticizing the local culture and misrepresenting the conditions of women in Afghanistan. For the contextual analysis, an investigative study of the writer's context, history, political affiliations and geographical positions has been done to understand the writer's background and the impact of that background on his text. For the theoretical support Gayatri Spivak's concepts of *sanctioned ignorance* and *subaltern* have been used. Moreover Lisa Lau's theory of Re-orientalism has been applied to investigate the author's affiliations with the western ideologies. For further disclosure of representational politics hidden behind the text New-Historicist theory has also been deployed

## 1. Research Questions

The study attempts to carry out an analysis of the selected literary text and find answers of the following research questions:

- A. How does the selected text add to the silence and marginalization of subaltern women when colonial discourse speaks for them?
- B. What are the ways in which the selected text serves the neo-colonial and orientalist discourse under the guise of women rights and critical nationalism?

### **3. Rights for Women and Cultural Productions**

Though many literary works have been studied for this research but following are some works that have been studied closely in order to develop a base and background for this research article. These works not only represent the previous efforts to analyze the selected work by different perspectives but those works have also been included in this literature review that have tried to explore the similar kind of matters like re-orientalism, orientalism and Postcolonialism in other literary works.

Pangestu and Darma in their research article, *Confession without Borders: 1st Wave Feminism against Woman's Right Disproportion in Atiq Rahimi's 'The Patience Stone*, argue that the social structure in Afghanistan is extremely violent towards women and patriarchal is completely dominating the women. They further say that according to Rahimi's depiction of the heroine Afghan women are considered sub-humans who have no other identity except the servants of their husbands. Moreover they discuss that women in Afghanistan have no say in their marriage and their marriage to other man is just a kind of business between her father and future husband. Pangestu and Darma argue that behind the plight of women, as depicted in *The Patience Stone* there is a big influence of Islamic teachings that grant men complete authority over the women and former are considered superior to later (Pangestu and Darma).

Seyedeh Robabeh and Ruzy Suliza in their research article, *Domestic violence against women in Atiq Rahimi's The Patience Stone* (2015), discuss the representation of domestic violence committed against the women throughout their lives. They argue that not only the husbands but the fathers also are violent towards their daughters and consider them inferior to their sons. The woman depicted in the novel lived a horrible life with her abusive father and her childhood trauma is an additional pain to her miserable married life. Moreover, they argue that the miserable life of the woman depicted in *The Patience Stone* is a true representation of the lives of Afghan women, who endure these painful conditions on daily basis. (Zabihzadah and Hashim).

Hend Ezzeldin in her article, *(Un)Representations of the Subaltern in Three Victorian Novels* discusses the representation of subaltern in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. She uses the subaltern theory to show that the representation of subaltern groups by the privileged culture actually makes them further silent and invisible. In *Wuthering Heights* she discusses the character of Heathcliff as a subaltern character, described as an Indian

and gypsy. In spite of his depiction as a hero the image of a gypsy and Indians still remain marginalized in the society and needs the tongue of the elite class to speak for them. Advancing the same line of argument, Ezzeldin discusses the character of Bertha Mason, the mad Indian woman in the attic in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and the character of Tonga in, *The Sign of Four* (Ezzeldin).

Ouardi and Sandy in their research paper, *Third World Women Representation in Western Feminist Discourse: A Critical Study* (2019) discussed the representation of third world marginalized classes in the works of western or western-minded writers. They discuss the misrepresentation of third world women in general and Arab women in particular by the western orientalist discourse. In the light of the subaltern and postcolonial theories of Chandra Mohanty, Ranjit Goha and Gayatri Chakravrtty Spivak, Ouardi and Sandy discuss that behind these so-called missions of western media to rescue their sisters in the third world societies are actually part of orientalist discourse aimed at the propagation of the evilness and primitiveness of the third world countries. These strategies allow the neo-colonial western power to justify and strength their new-colonial hold on the third world (El Ouardi and Sandy).

Rohma Saleem in her research paper "Marketing Otherness: A Re-Orientalist gaze into Pakistani fiction with focus on *Trespassing* and *Typhoon*" discusses Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* and Qaisera Shahraz's *Typhoon* from the perspective of Re-Orientalism. In this paper she explores how the writers of both texts promote the orientalist agenda due to their interests with the west. She discusses that these writers, along with the representation of ignorance and uncivilized society, have also exaggeratedly shown the corruption, poverty and lawlessness of Pakistan. She calls this attitude the "self othering" that continues throughout these two novels. This is not critical nationalism or fanonism but an effort to please the empire and serve their interests. (Saleem)

## **5. Re-Orientalism, Subalternity and Literary Portrayals of the Afghan Woman**

The primary reason the subalterns fail to rebel against the ruling class is because of the social, economic and political institutions that can give their presence a voice and make them heard (Ullah, 6). The only way that the subaltern can subvert their position is if they initiate some revolution that can shift the class structure, yet the consequences cannot be attained immediately. Historical writings by the ruling elite eliminate the chances of establishing a narrative of the people in terms of the resistance produced against colonialism and or against the colonial elitism (Ullah et al 07). Postcolonialism is a political theory and counter-discourse that is concerned with the exploitation of colonized countries by the colonizer nations and affects and aftermaths of this colonization. Though other thinkers had worked with this approach but Edward Said is widely considered the founder of postcolonial theory and his book *Orientalism* (1978)

is considered its starting point. Post colonialists also expose the ways in which colonizer nations create an impression that pre-colonial conditions of the colonized nations were inhumanly and unsocial and in this way they try to justify their colonization and confiscation of native resources. In this way post-colonialism is a rejection of colonialism.

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern history has been written by the privileged, higher classes and subaltern have never got chance to represent themselves and same practice is still going on as the neo-colonialist powers speak for the rights of subaltern women and this benevolence is not for the rights of those women but to strengthen and justify the neo-colonial strategies of the west. In this way women become a tool of fighting between colonial and local patriarchy. She gives the example of Satti practice and its abolition in India by the British government. She says that this abolition might have served to save lives of some women but primarily it served to prove that British are civilized and Indians are barbarians. She claims that same kind of condescension has been carried on by today’s western or pro-west intellectuals. She criticizes Foucault and Deleuze for applying their European ideologies and epistemic frameworks on the third world countries that have completely different cultural and social conditions. She calls this attitude epistemic violence that is based on the sanctioned ignorance of western philosophers. She says that language is not innocent and comes with the interests of its producers and knowledge is like any other commodity that is exported from west to east. Though she ends on a pessimistic note that the subaltern cannot speak, but she actually inspires the subaltern to speak for themselves instead of being misrepresented between the fight of tradition and modernization.

Lisa Lau introduced the concept of Re-Orientalism in her 2009 article “*Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals*”. It is highly influenced by Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and to some extent is an extension of it. Lisa Lau discusses the production and promotion of orientalist ideas by orient writers themselves. Such writers accept the orientalist ideologies and consider the western traditions only solution for the betterment of East. She posits that the works of such writers are promoted by the Occidental marketers and get instant recognition in the international markets. Such works also have great chances of winning many western prizes. These works promote the western agenda of the representation of an uncivilized, mysterious and ignorant East Such writers have conscious or unconscious interests behind this kind of attitude. After giving examples of Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, Lisa Lau accuses such writers of “having cowardly, western-approval-seeking motives.” (Lau)

*The Patience Stone* is an impressive work of literature. The point or focus of the critique and criticism in this research article is not the literary beauty and validity of this text

but this research is intended to expose the influence of the dominant discourse that is affecting the text and the writer of the text.

*The Patience Stone* was written in 2008 when US Army along with many other western forces was at war in Afghanistan. To justify their invasion and military operations in Afghanistan they needed to propagate an inhuman, barbaric and savage image of Afghan culture and violations of women rights was one of their strongest propagandistic allegations along with the blame of promoting terrorism in the world.

“This tale is written in memory of an Afghan poet savagely murdered by her husband”

This statement in the introductory pages of the book shows the importance of historical context regarding this novel and demands a new historicist analysis to understand this text. According to New-Historicism a text can't be interpreted properly without taking into account the background of the author because there is no possibility to narrate the actual, objective history and the representation of any historical work has the influence of its writer's personal affiliations and political powers working around the production of that text. According to Luis Montrose, New-Historicism deals with the “textuality of history and the historicity of text” (Mambrol). In this novel the background of the author and political situation surrounding the text is very important.

Atiq Rahimi's father was an influential beurocrate in Afghan liberal, communist government at the time of Russian invasion and retaliation of the Afghan Mujahidin in 1979. Rahimi got his high school education from *Lycee Esteqlal*, a French funded school in Kabul, famous for its western style of education; this school was one of the most modern schools in Afghanistan. In an interview Rahimi says;

“My father was a germanophone, my brother, sister and mother were anglophones. They wanted someone from the family to be a francophone” (Rahimi, Atiq Rahimi on language and expression in Afghanistan).

So, his early life shows his family affiliations and inclinations towards the western ways of life and there distance from mainstream afghan culture. Rahimi's timing to abandon Afghanistan is very important because it was a time when mainstream Islamic ideologies had started to gain power in Afghanistan and liberal communist powers had started to lose their hold. In 1984 he fled Afghanistan and requested French government to grant him political asylum that he was granted in the same year. Along with all these affiliations with and dependences on the west Rahimi also had his career depended on the audience of Europe as he was a French filmmaker and author.

“A kind of self censorship comes into play when I write in Persian. My acquired language which I have chosen, gives me a kind of freedom to express myself, away from this self-censorship and an unconscious shame that dwells in us since childhood.” (Rahimi, *The Patience Stone*)

These words by Rahimi, written in the introductory pages of the selected book, show impact of western language and culture on him as Gayatri Spivak says that “knowledge is like any other commodity Exported by the west” (Spivak). At the price of liberating him from self-censorship and unconscious shame (by which he unknowingly means conscience), western civilization is making him write for its interests. Rahimi is confusing this playing and being used in the hands of west with freedom and throughout this text we see him paying price of his western knowledge.

“When I reach the seventy-second cycle (of praying beads) that cretinous mullah will come will come and reproach me because I can’t take good care of you and can’t follow his instructions about prayers....otherwise you would be getting better. (Rahimi, *The Patience Stone*)

Here we can see Rahimi is developing a negative picture of Afghan Islamic culture by using the character of a woman. At another occasion the woman addresses god and says that if her husband gets well she “will never let him participate in war even in the name of God” (Rahimi, *The Patience Stone*) because the families of Mujahidin suffer so badly in their absence. Here we can see extreme discouragement for the resistance against western invasion in Afghanistan that was going on at the time of the production of this novel in 2008.

At another occasion when a mujahid enters her house and investigates the woman, her arguments promote the anti-Afghan ideology;

“The woman: I sell my body

Mujahid: What bullshit is this?

The woman: I sell my body, as you sell your blood.”

The woman: (later alone) if I had not told him that I am not a whore, he would have raped me.

Rahimi here curses the Afghan nationalism and resistance against western invasion by mixing this rejection of Afghan jihad with the modern-liberal feminism. This kind of remarks cannot do any good for the women of Afghanistan but actually misuse the feminist ideologies to support the actions of powerful western countries. Rahimi does not let this dialogue to show that mujahid as a pious man but later it is

revealed that the mujahid did not touch the woman after knowing that she is a whore because for such men it is not an achievement. Moreover, later on it is revealed that the elder fighter uses the younger fighter accompanying him for his sexual satisfaction. This kind of depiction of Afghan fighters is being used in 2008 when the mujahidin in Afghanistan are at war against the American and European armies. So, it clearly illustrates the political ideology of dominating discourse, working behind this text.

If we look from the perspective of Re-Orientalism, the writer of the selected text is a re-Orientalist according to the definitions provided by Lisa Lau in her 2009 article "*Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals*". In this article she criticizes the third world orient writers who embrace and promote the ideologies of Orientalism as she says about such writers; "many South Asian producers of culture are participants in a resurfacing of new manifestations of Orientalism" (Lau). For these producers of orientalism belonging to orient itself, Gayatri Spivak has aptly used the term 'local informants'.

According to Lisa Lau re-Orientalism is "based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether" (Lau). According to the theory of re-Orientalism we can see Atiq Rahimi in the category of writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Malala Yousaf Zai, etc.

In postcolonial theory, the subaltern are those people who, apart from colonialism are further marginalized by the local classes like the lower races, poor and women. Edward Said's famous book *Orientalism* (1978) was the start of postcolonial theory and Chandra Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* and Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak* are the seminal works of Subaltern theory.

In the selected novel the misrepresentation of orient is very clear. Throughout the novel we see the representation of Afghan culture as savage, extremely patriarch and uncivilized. A very important perspective of this novel is the representation of extreme violence on women. This representation by a man who is a naturalized French citizen is an apt illustration of Gayatri Spivak's concept, "can the subaltern speak?" When this re-Orientalist French-Afghan writer is representing the women of a third world country it is actually adding to the silence of these subaltern women and rather making the colonial discourse more powerful that is also a patriarchal discourse. The subaltern women in this way are used as a tool in the war of western colonialism and the local patriarchal forces.

"One of them (his brothers) would have had married me. Perhaps they would have been happier if you had died" (Rahimi, *The Patience Stone*)



Here the comatose, injured husband is lying in the house and the wife is telling him that his brothers in his absence used to have sexual feelings for her and if he had died during the war instead of just being injured then they would have been happy because one of the brothers would have been able to marry her. This description shows the family values of an afghan family and that too of a family that has active participation in war against occupying forces.

“Your mother came to our place for hand of my younger sister but my father told that it was not her turn to marry but mine. So your mother simply said no problem.” (Rahimi, The Patience Stone)

Here the writer is criticizing the local method of selecting a girl for the boy because it is not according to the standards of west. As Edward Said introduces the western mentality about east that “East is timeless” this notion is very evidently being promoted in this novel. (Said)

Moreover she discusses her father as being very abusive and indifferent to his daughters and he lost one of his daughters in a bet. All he was interested in was quails fight and his daughters were less important than his quails. Writer also mentions a relative of the woman who had sexual relations with his daughter-in-law.

“My aunt is quite right when she says that those who don’t know how to make love make war”

The unnamed woman also complains that her husband has never been good in bed and she was never satisfied sexually. Edward Said in his book Orientalism discusses this orientalist assumption of west about eastern genders. West thinks that eastern men are impotent and cannot satisfy their women while women are overly erotic and sexually unsatisfied. (Said)

“I am not insane or possessed. I am not under the spell of any demon. What is coming out of my throat is a voice buried for thousands of years” (Rahimi, The Patience Stone)

Here Rahimi is trying to please the western feminist powers. He is trying to promote their notion of strategic essentialism to bring the women from the entire world under the flag of western feminism.

“I prayed for a miscarriage. So that I could lose that bloody child once and for all but I was so relieved when I saw that it wasn’t a boy as I dreamt but a girl. A girl would never betray me, I thought.” (Rahimi, The Patience Stone)

To the end of the novel woman explains her fears of giving birth to a boy because she thinks that men are monsters. This kind of feminist notions against the

men who are at war at the time of production of this novel show the propagation of justification of colonial occupation and virtue of colonial culture under the guise of women rights as Spivak has explained in her essay when she says;

“Between patriarchy and imperialism the figure of woman disappears, not into nothingness but misrepresentation, caught between tradition and modernization.”  
(Spivak)

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The selected work of fiction has strong connections with the historical and political events surrounding it at the time of its production in 2008. The setting is some unmentioned place in Afghanistan in early 1990s. The writer not only has strong affiliations with the Western culture since his childhood, as being educated in a French-funded school in Kabul and later on getting French citizenship after the outset of Soviet-Afghan War, but his literary career and success also depends almost entirely on the western market and discourse as he has been living there since then. Rahimi has depicted marginalized, poor but still bold Afghan female characters that are condemning and cursing their male counterparts, mostly because of their negligence of their families for jihad, not fulfilling their sexual desires, etc. Rahimi has also depicted Afghan fighters as having illicit sexual relations with their fellow fighters. This kind of depiction of Afghan women as the victims of jihad mindset is an effort of the writer to serve and promote the colonial agenda of justification of colonization by portraying the colonized culture as uncivilized, barbaric and sadistically patriarchal. Moreover an enormously negative portrayal of Afghan fighters is also an effort to please and serve the agenda of the western powers at war with Afghanistan at the time of novel's production. Afghan women and mujahidin have been shown to be a total negation of each other and this impression has been created that all the problems of women are caused by the mujahidin and jihad. So, this feminism is actually promoting hate for mujahidin and serving the colonizers and intruders.

Spivak remarks that the subaltern cannot speak and the subaltern women are doubly marginalized compared to their male counterparts. The researcher contends that the subalterns that Spivak speaks of are the first order, whereas, there are the subalterns of the second order, who in addition to experiencing the first order subalternization during the colonial regime, got to experience it once again even with more severity during the fall of Dhaka. Furthermore, this second order subalternization spurs from the same causes as is the first order, where the people are not allowed any economic, political or social representation. This deprivation in social, economic and political sphere results in further expulsion of the already marginalized people to the outer edges of the peripheries where there is no voice of theirs and no representation.

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