

**Transnational Feminism and Literature: A Study of Women's Realities in *The Lowland, Burnt Shadows and The Good Muslim***

Sarah Habib

Student ID: 13263016

Department of English and Humanities

December 2015



BRAC University  
Mohakhali, Dhaka.

**Transnational Feminism and Literature: A Study of Women's Realities in *The Lowland, Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim***

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Humanities

Of BRAC University

by

Sarah Habib

Student ID: 13263016

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for The Degree of

Master of Arts in English

December 2015

## **Acknowledgments**

“The road to hell is paved by works-in-progress.” – Phillip Roth. Nothing can be truer for a graduating student who is approaching dissertation deadline. By Allah’s grace, I have quite a number of people to thank, who made the progress of my work a little easier.

I would like to begin by thanking my supervisor Dr. Shuchi Karim, for initiating my thoughts towards this thesis and for allowing me to complete it at my own pace. You have taught me how to explore my strengths and limitations in a way that I hope will help me work on projects with bigger challenges. My earnest thanks to Professor Firdous Azim and other faculty members of the ENH department, who have, at some points, contributed to my academic achievements. Your elevated expectations always pushed me to try harder.

To my boss at work, Arshia Aziz, who allowed me flexible hours and made sure I reached my classes on time. Thank you for your invaluable support!

Sincerest gratitude towards my family for arranging me to work in peace, no matter how chaotic it must have gotten in the house. Much thanks to my sisters Farah, Anica and Isra for filling in my shoes and for pampering me when I needed the comfort. Ammu, I owe you much more than the words will ever describe.

Mehrana, it is a big consolation knowing that we are always in it together.

Untara, I mention you last but you have been my most reliable support system. You helped me brainstorm, to arrange my work, pointed out my mistakes and offered valuable feedback. Without your constant cheerleading, this dissertation would not have made deadline. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Transnational Feminist Practices: An Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Postmodern Enquiry of Transnational Feminism: <i>The Lowland, Burnt Shadows</i> and <i>The Good Muslim</i> .....</b>	<b>11</b>
The Postmodern and the Transnational .....	14
Postmodern multiplicity in <i>The Lowland, Burnt Shadows</i> and <i>The Good Muslim</i> .....	17
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Politics of Location and Negotiations of Space in the Transnational Woman: Gauri and Hiroko .....</b>	<b>23</b>
The Negotiations of “Location” and the Hybrid “Space” in <i>The Lowlands</i> .....	28
<i>Burnt Shadows</i> : Hiroko’s Celebration of the Fluid Self through Peace and Conflict .....	33
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>Women’s Interaction with Nationalism and Religion: Transnational Realities .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Women and Nationalism in <i>The Lowland</i> and <i>Burnt Shadows</i> .....	40
National and Religious Fundamentalism in <i>The Good Muslim</i> .....	45
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Works Cited Page .....</b>	<b>57</b>

### Abstract

Feminists of today believe in working collaboratively to form transnational alliances and to inspect a wide range of issues that intersect with the lived experiences of the woman. The contemporary paradigm of transnational feminism locates the woman's positioning from a global perspective. It is to understand how modern day context of imperialism and colonialism affect the realities of women living in different places. In order to contest mainstream representations of the non-Western woman in Western discourses, the transnational feminist campaigns to recognize inequalities across different groups of women worldwide. It is essential to realize that the movement, as are the women's realities, is not uniform. The presentation of female experiences in fictional works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie and Tahmima Anam explore diverse and unavoidable themes of migration, diaphora, national and religious interventions, and patriarchal oppression etc. – elements that are fundamental in shaping the women's lives. This dissertation adopts the transnational lens in examining novels *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim* to investigate the South Asian moments of differences in women's unique experiences. It is through these experiences do we anticipate a subversion of the solidarity assumed by dominant discourses.

## Chapter 1

### Transnational Feminist Practices: An Introduction

Women have come a long way since the early revolutionary days of the first wave feminism. The feminist liberation movements have continued to take up the form of discourse through which the consequent waves encompassed the political, social, economic etc. factors of the struggle. Women's writing and formulation of theoretical frameworks became the key catalysts to drive along and accelerate the movement, which is also why theories on feminism and women's literature experienced a rapid rise – first in the West, and then gradually across the world. Transnational practices in academia emerged as a joint venture between feminist communities aspiring to address and fill in the gaps between different theoretical applications in literary and academic traditions.

A female literary tradition originating in the West, however, presents the threat of homogenising the woman in a global context, in which First World theorists assume a shared sisterhood with women across the world. This hegemonic assumption disregards the personal, cultural, national and international realities of an enormous body of women globally. Whether it is from a Eurocentric desire to silence the exotic 'other' or a pedagogical process of focusing on dominant cultures, the Western feminist frameworks have essentially left out the non-white women who are burdened with colonial and diasporic legacies. For example, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf draws her conclusions by comparing men and women's literary traditions in fictional academic institutions in typical British settings. From her and her contemporaries, it is ambitious to hope for a glimpse of the reality of women anywhere away from the British setting, but the theories perpetuated by her successors accumulates to form a theoretical and literary hegemony onto the Other woman. Likewise, American second-wave feminist Kate Millet challenges the tyranny of dominant sexual

stereotypes in *Sexual Politics* (1968), by closely analysing the patriarchal bias in literary productions and by exposing the male-dominated culture that produced literary works degrading to women. She basically discusses the grievances suffered by the woman writer in general, assuming a universal role in her examples and overlooking the woman outside the American culture. Similarly, Betty Friedan<sup>1</sup> is also highly credited for addressing the widespread unhappiness among financially sound housewives in America during the 1950' and 60's. She challenges the female's sole familial purpose and emphasises the importance of a career. Her conclusions are also based on research done on American households of a certain class, grossly excluding women not only from other geographical locations, but also from a wide range of economic classes. The list can be stretched much longer but it is clear that the non-white woman has not only been othered by patriarchal traditions. They have also been othered (or altogether excluded) by the white woman's literary traditions.

As a Muslim Bangladeshi myself, I have spent my childhood and adolescent years away from my country. I was never too far away, however, from the influence of the migrated culture that has embedded itself within the 'desi' communities living abroad. This continual exposure has created in me an understanding of not only the semiotic and traditional relevance between the Indian-Bangladeshi-Pakistani aka 'desi' cultures, but also the customs and the diasporic aesthetics of living in a foreign land. This positionality has allowed me to negotiate a space for myself within the intersections of the politics of race, gender, class, religion etc. unique to my shifting geographical locations. I have always found it difficult to identify myself within the theoretical frameworks offered by Western feminist discourses because of the tendency to homogenise women's realities into a universal Third World Woman construct. In the contemporary times of heightened postcolonial awareness,

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

transnational migration and globalisation, the need to examine positionalities outside such stereotypes has become increasingly urgent.

In many ways, transnational feminism – under the post-feminism phase – is a response to the global feminist frameworks: it seeks to examine the curious interrelationships of culture, race, geography and history that intersect with the political, social and economic factors of influence, and looks at where gender fits in it. In this paper, I intend to examine the paradigms of feminism that highlight the differences between international and transnational concepts. This dissertation will explore the shortcomings of global or international frameworks in capturing the realities and experiences of the othered woman – more specifically, in the greater Indian continent. Since these frameworks are trying to account for lives of women living in different places and because literature is widely acknowledged as reflections of human behaviour and society, it is advantageous to use literary fiction as means to analyse ideological and theoretical assumptions. I will use selective works of literature to examine how transnational aspects of theoretical analysis play out in the fictional works by contemporary women writers. While many emerging strands of feminisms (black, Caribbean, Latin, Chicana etc.) contribute to the umbrella discourse, South Asian feminism is experiencing a decline under the steady attacks from right-wing nationalism and religious fundamentalism, the co-option by ‘NGO-ization’ and neo-liberal state agendas since the 1970’s (Roy 2012). In attempts to introduce a ‘new wave’ in the region, methodological compilation of theoretical essays and fictional works are employed among many female writers.

Women writers of the greater Indian continent are steadily establishing a strong foothold in the international arena of literature. They reflect not only the women’s struggle against an ingrained patriarchy, but also against the residue of colonial oppression, trauma of war, poverty, mass migration, loss of the homeland, nostalgia and against other forms of



global hegemonies. My paper will look at the authorship and creative representation of women in the Bangladesh-India-Pakistan triangle through the lens provided by writers highly popular in the region. The following chapters will look at the roles of heroines in Indian bestseller author Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland: A Novel* (2013), Bangladesh's budding literary star Tahmima Anam's portrayal of women in her novel *The Good Muslim* (2011), and Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie's female protagonists in *Burnt Shadows* (2009). It is through a comparative analysis of the novels that I will explore the notions of identity and space negotiated by women in a transnational context.

I chose these women writers and their corresponding novels based on the following commonalities: The authors are all from privileged backgrounds and have received at least some education - if not all - from the 'centre' (the Western domain). It helps to ground my argument that having received Western education, they are still able to write about their homelands and cultural experiences in a manner that not only captures the essence of their own roots but also detaches away from the Western ideologies to create their own. The results thus produce a literary identity hybridised, replicated, assimilated and impure. This fortifies the underlying principles of the transnational project and enables the analytical study of theories (subalternity, hybridity, diaspora, travel) and methodologies of examination. Secondly, the novels explore a wide range of female experiences in relation to the notion of gender in patriarchy. Each element is closely related to others – family, nation, religion etc. – and it is in these linkages that the woman finds diversity in her placement. It also facilitates an understanding of how gender constructs are linked with colonial representations. Although post-colonial studies address gender issues in colonial articulation of the Third World woman, the danger often lies in the recreation of the very images transnational discourses challenge. As Grewal and Kaplan identify, “some feminist practices continue to use colonial discourse critiques in order to equate ‘colonised’ with the ‘woman’, creating essentialist and

monolithic categories that suppress the issues of diversity, conflict and multiplicity within categories”(3). To break clear of such categories, characters in the novels demonstrate the multiple identities in women both within and beyond domesticity, contesting the feminine roles that label them. Thirdly, the realities of the protagonists are encumbered by the trauma of war. This shows how the already-troubled female identities are further unsettled by political disputes, national or religious oppression and territorial conflicts. The escape is no longer a matter of spatial departure, but also of a personal negotiation with the circumstances rendered by getting caught up in between the cross-fire of regional politics. It also leads to examining the aspect of leaving ‘home’ and the new forms of diasporas, which are borne from a sense of displacement and the struggle to belong. The novels help to place the question of gender in such struggles, and depict the lives of women affected.

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

concept of gender performativity.<sup>2</sup> It is, thus, impossible to conduct a research paper that captures all of the above streams of studies. My primary focus will remain on theoretical interactions between postmodernity and transnational feminist modes. The paper will also look into the fluid identities encompassed by the woman's geopolitical positioning, and her cultural negotiations with the hegemonic structures of her surrounding realities.

This paper will draw arguments from Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's influential volume *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), which explore the possibilities of feminist practices across cultural divides, without ignoring cultural differences or becoming victims of cultural relativism. Grewal and Kaplan compile different essays to propose feminist reading and writing practices that counter the 'scattered hegemonies' of theoretical frameworks such as postmodernism, neo and post-colonialisms and feminisms. While they look at feminist practices that resist dominating Western frameworks, they also attempt to understand the ways in which one can understand the production and reception of diverse forms of feminism within a framework of transnational social/cultural/economic movements. In their opinion, transnational feminism is a far more inclusive movement which takes into account the aspects of race, class, gender, history etc. and their corresponding relationships between people, capital and ideas. Theirs is a call for more testimonials from women across the globe in the forms of feminist theory and literature.

The following chapter will look at the questions of modernity and postmodernity with regard to transnational practices in women writing. Even though we are constantly critiquing the limitations of modernity and enquiring after the system of effects that structure postmodernity, it is a readily accepted fact among feminists that postmodernism (and postcolonialism) are deployed by women from different locations to give transnational platform the tools to combat homogenising theories of the West. However, many

---

<sup>2</sup> Moi, Toril. "Feminist, Female, Feminine." *The Feminist Reader*. London, 1986. 117-132. Print.

postmodernist or post-structural feminists do not utilise the transnational frame or consider discourses of race and history in their analysis of the agency of woman (Grewal and Caplan, 3). Their suggestions run parallel with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's analysis in her article "Under Western Eyes", where she implies that feminist writings often "colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, and thereby producing/representing a composite singular "Third World Woman" – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (Mohanty, 1984). I will utilize Grewal and Caplan's arguments from their introduction to "Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity" to explore the extent to which gender is represented in the master frameworks. My assessment will also look at the theoretical overlaps through which transnational feminist practises presents itself in literature. The chapter will further attempt to demonstrate how Lahiri, Shamsie and Anam treat the literary aspects of the narration, characters and plots of their respective novels to reaffirm the transnational as a liberal framework, which does not reject dominant traditions but *borrow*s from them to create a hybridised discourse. Individual participation in this discourse is an imperative variable.

Chapter 3 will focus on the politics of "location" in transnational feminist writing. This critical approach will look at the conditions of space and location in women's writing and the cross-cultural doctrine attached to it. Since Virginia Woolf expressed modernist concerns for women's space, feminists have extended their works to accommodate the concepts of location – often omitting the necessary cultural translation in the investigations of women's texts outside Western production. The chapter will focus on Homi Bhaba's notions of the "Third Space"<sup>3</sup> to locate a form of identity that stems from cultural hybridity in the

---

<sup>3</sup> The Third Space is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity that explains the uniqueness of each person, actor or context as a "hybrid". Bhabha describes this space where there are "unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation".

contemporary domain of globalization. I will posit assessments of identity within the framework of transnational experiences played out in the novels. This analysis aims to understand the realities of women facing migration and their attempts to ‘relocate’ themselves in cultures in which they have either volunteered to or have been forced to commit. For this, I will employ Kamila Shamsie’s narration of *Burnt Shadows* to portray the continual relocation of the woman, in face of war and tragedy, and how this creates an identity unique to personal realities. A comparison with Jhumpa Lahiri’s heroines will present the instable nature of such identities, through which subversions of stereotypical images of the Third World woman take place.

The final chapter of this dissertation will continue to examine the identities embodied by women, but through their unique negotiating abilities with patriarchal tools such as nationalism and fundamental practices of religion. Here the transnational framework will come handy in not only critiquing patriarchal hegemonies, but also in destabilizing Western assumptions of a shared oppression among South Asian women. By scoring in on the fictional trajectories of *The Lowlands*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim*, this chapter will emphasize the protagonists’ individual experiences in relation to the plots. This is to evaluate the significance of circumstantial differences and multiplicity of the South Asian contextual realities. The comparative analysis between the novels aims to entail a liberal perspective of the South Asian woman under the transnational feminist light.

## Chapter 2

### **Postmodern Enquiry of Transnational Feminism: *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim***

It goes without saying that feminists arguing for a transnational framework insist on considering the changing conditions and political overlaps between interdisciplinary studies of gender and other dominant discourses. This elaborate mission calls for the re-examination of an incredibly enormous collection of work done by feminist theorists and other streams of discipline, and, quite naturally, has drawn both approval and criticism from multiple directions. Grewal and Caplan's transnational project *Scattered Hegemonies* proposes more focus on numerous works emerging from theories of travel, diaspora and the points of intersections of feminisms, colonial and postcolonial discourses, modernism and postmodern hybridity (Grewal and Caplan, 1). In their efforts to provide a "springboard" for the launch of future collaborative projects by other transnational feminists, Grewal and Caplan effectively brings to attention the tricky and ambiguous spaces occupied by the critiques of modernism and postmodernism in support of a transnational feminist literary practise.

My own readings of novels by South Asian women writers reveal the inadequacy of broad-spectrum theoretical frameworks and the limitations of their criticisms to explain master narratives present in South Asian literature. Because both modernism and postmodernism are predominantly Western formulations, their application on the foreign domain pose problems to non-Western readings of literature. To either hypothesize along the entirety of such theories or to reject them totally falls short in explaining the realities of the non-Western women in concern. I do not propose that Western theories are absolutely insufficient to address the realities of women in South Asian novels. There are inevitable encounters within Western feminist literary practises that intersect with the realities of

women from all ends of the world, chiefly because of the common struggle against a widespread patriarchy – both the literary and the material. I merely suggest that it is imperative to approach the issue of gender and locate the woman within a literary framework which is holistic but can also address the inescapable influence of regional political realities.

My stream of thoughts matches Grewal and Caplan's assertions in *Scattered Hegemonies*, where they strongly emphasise on the inclusion of power relations between key concepts such as colonialism, modernity and globalisation, and from which the cultural flows cannot be overlooked when interrogating the challenges of discourse. They feel that feminist movements will fail to comprehend the material conditions structuring women's lives in diverse locations if feminist political practises do not acknowledge cultural flows. They further say:

If feminist movements cannot understand the dynamics of these material conditions, they will be unable to construct an effective opposition to current economic and cultural hegemonies that are taking new global forms. Without an analysis of transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations, feminist movements will remain isolated and prone to reproducing the universal gestures of dominant Western cultures (17).

When reading different pieces of literature – biographical and fictional – written by women from different locations, it becomes clear that not only do these hegemonies (both the latent and the functional) pervade through mediums as an everyday cultural intake, but it is so diffused that it is almost impossible to separate the imposed from the culturally inherent. This is why feminists engaging in dialogue to distinguish between theoretical standpoints must re-examine the theoretical foreground and its continued applications within a *contextual* structure. The context cannot be eliminated from the practise, and yet there is “no such thing

as a feminism free of asymmetrical power relation” (Grewal and Kaplan).<sup>4</sup> As Chandra Mohanty also argues, it is important to remain wary of the “Third World difference” because “it is in the production of the Third World Difference that Western feminists appropriate and ‘colonise’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts that characterise the lives of women in different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes of these countries.” It is, therefore, in the process of “homogenisation and systemization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in recent feminist discourses” (Mohanty, 1984). This is also why the co-option and circulation of terms ‘First World’, ‘Third World’, ‘centre-periphery’, ‘diaspora’, ‘postcolonial’ etc. must be examined. I find questioning the constructs of modernity and postmodernity essential to these arguments because contemporary writing among South Asian women showcases the emergence of a literary genre that is representative of the flux in theoretical practise, some of which also appears to have stemmed from modernity and postmodernity in feminist literature.

I choose to look at the novels *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim* because, even when read free of speculation as simple pieces of fiction, one cannot disown how loaded they are with issues of nationalism, trauma of war, migratory movements, political intervention of globalisation, patriarchal and familial constructs. The position of women amidst this chaos is also highlighted. I argue that not only do these novels present modernity, but also that the multiplicity with which each author has approached her numerous subject matters characterizes postmodern sensibilities. The degrees of acceptance or rejection of rigid theoretical applications within these novels illustrate a possible picture of South Asian women’s writing in a period of transition. In this chapter I intend to chart the development of transnational feminist modes against the modern and postmodern landscape across which these novels play out. I will highlight the importance of modernist and

---

<sup>4</sup> Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices." *Jouvert* 5.1 (2000): 4-7. Print.



postmodernist frameworks in the emergence of transnational critiques. Then, I will point out the hallmarks of modernism and postmodernism encapsulated within the novels.

### **The Post-modern and the Transnational**

Grewal and Kaplan's criticisms of modernity and postmodernity lay the foundation for their arguments towards transnational feminist practises. The most popular criticisms and reassessment of modernity in the contemporary postmodern era disclose a common ground shared by feminists in the West and from other locations. As the modernist stream of writing witnessed a rise in favour of experimentation and individualism among feminist champions of the West (that embraced issues of class, gender the struggle for knowledge and alienation) somehow systematically excluded were issues of contextual realities in non-Western domains. What were also created are the so-called First World/Third World binaries in women's writing, which are seen countered in Grewal and Kaplan's postmodern feminist discussions<sup>5</sup>:

We see postmodernism as a critique of modernist agendas as they are manifested in various forms and locations around the world. Our critiques of certain forms of feminism emerge from their wiling participation in modernity with all its colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women. In supporting agendas of modernity, therefore, feminists misrecognise and fail to resist Western hegemonies (2).

They further argue that postmodernity is an immensely powerful and useful conception that presents an opportunity to analyse ways in which a culture of modernity is produced in diverse locations. The study of postmodernity, therefore, can offer feminists the complex and

---

<sup>5</sup> Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. "Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity." *Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1994. Print.

dynamic model of multiplicity which can accommodate aspects of socio-economic, cultural and political relations attached to the specific location. And yet, even though it is often practised as an oppositional critique of modernism, it “remains on the continuum with modernism, there is no position outside of modernity.” The terrain is of coalition and cooperation, and the transnational techniques aim to project something similar to that. “If Western theorists of postmodernism cannot allow for unequal, uneven and nonsynchronous expressions of modernity in reading and interpreting the cultural productions of the so-called Third World, for example, any possibility for solidarity between feminists and others who work within differences is obstructed” (4-5). The reason why postmodernity settles well with transnational feminist practises is because postmodern feminism is the ultimate acceptor of diversity – multiple truths, multiple roles and multiple realities are central to its focus. It is also, therefore, susceptible to direct interventions of modernity and globalisation. The transnational mode needs this acceptance and intervention.

Despite the diversity presented in postmodern applications for a transnational movement, there are some imperfections. Among critics of postmodernism are experts on culture who understand that postmodernism is not free from politics. Stuart Hall argues that the ‘global’ and ‘local’ are two aspects of the same phenomenon of globalisation in a postmodern setting. He identifies the oppositional nature of postmodernity: while it gives importance to the ‘local’ aspects inherent to certain boundaries, it also is a platform where there is constant reworking with so-called marginal groups and local identities to “speak right across those boundaries” (Hall 1992).<sup>6</sup> The danger, then, lies of the “local” being globalised as a stereotyped image/concept across borders. This powerful possibility in a transnational practise may pose risks of paving the way for cultural homogenisation, especially if deployed by the West.

---

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall cited in "Introduction to Postmodernism and Popular Culture." *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Much of the debate regarding globalisation is structured around this problematic notion of a homogenising 'West'. In this view, cultural flows are seen as "unidirectional" – i.e., from the 'West' to the 'rest'" (12). However, the question then arises that what element of which culture (goods and services) are deployed by whom and where. This question is hardly addressed. Grewal and Kaplan uses the example of the Barbie dressed in a saree to demonstrate how this 'global' product is appropriated to represent an Asian market. They ask, why the saree and not in other South Asian style of women dress, who plays with these dolls and where? The appropriation gives rise to a global perception of what is South Asian, as opposed to the localised realities of different regions of the sub-continent. Armand Mattelart notes the lack of study of differentiating elements within the 'local' and calls for an investigation of links between multinational corporate strategies and dominant nationalist agendas in the cultural production and appropriation. He condemns what he calls "transnational centricism", a term that assumes local subjects to be "passive receptacles" who "mechanically reproduce the norms, values, and signs of transnational power"(Mattelart 1983). Feminists must be able to distinguish between the local and global links in order to avoid falling victim to potential hegemony within transnational practises.

It now becomes imperative to ask where in the storm of debates on feminist intersections with modernity, postmodernity, post-colonialism, globalisation, transnationalism etc. do authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie and Tahmima Anam fit. Not only are they members of a community struggling with the colonial legacy, but their fictional works of literature (written in global English language) have received international accreditation. Can their work be considered part-and-parcel of the postcolonial movement in joint efforts to counter hegemonic representation? Or are they lobbying for a deeper appreciation as women writers portraying lives of both men and women in an expanding transnational environment? Lahiri, Shamsie and Anam together form a geographical triangle

that cannot escape the debates of women in nationalist discourses, owing to the nature of the authors' engagement with the region's war and politics. There is inevitable interaction between gender, religion and nationalism in the post-Liberation war period in Anam's novel *The Good Muslim*, while Lahiri portrays a family disrupted by nationalistic ideals of the people's Naxalite movement. Shamsie decentralises the idea of 'home' and 'foreign' when her female protagonist Hiroko Tanaka travels extensively across borders to escape the trauma of war and political upheavals, but encounters it over and over again. Shamsie explores globalization from a rather unconventional axis: she transcends from familiar centres such as London, Paris or New York and *creates* new centres in Nagasaki, Delhi, Karachi, Kabul, and Guantanamo Bay etc. – all of which are strategic sites of global interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, any attempts to comprehend the South Asian woman's contemporary positions (as presented in the authors' narratives) and provide analysis from only circumscribed frameworks will grossly undervalue the contextual realities of the women. The increasing need for accommodating possible facets of migration, diaspora, national idealism, religion, family and other related themes in analysis can only be met by tapping into multiple frameworks.

### **Postmodern multiplicity in *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim***

The curious overlap between theoretical streams is evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's writings. Her novels on displacement and diaspora among Indians living in America destabilises the much harped-on binaries between the West and 'rest'. My motive for choosing Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland* for my analysis over her other highly acclaimed works, such as *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, stems from the nature of the plot's geo-politics that is central to shaping the transnational feminist arguments. One of the appeals of *The Lowland* is that it does not come across to the audience as a feminist read. What Lahiri maintains throughout her narrative is a fair balance between gender divides. The fraternal

relationship between male protagonists Udayan and Subhash is central to the story because not only does it determine Gauri's fate, but it also links the problematic counterpart of nationalistic politics with the family's troubles. The traditional gender binaries and consequent roles in domesticity and parenthood are seen subverted when Gauri settles in Rhode Island with Subhash after Udayan's death. The migration aspect of the novel further blurs the centre-periphery model; although the movement from India to the United States appears unidirectional, there is a predestined return to the homeland. If America is the centre where Gauri is empowered with an academic career, it is also where she subverts her "entitled" role as a traditional Indian woman. She chooses to leave her family for complete independence and remains an absent parent to Bela. She further experiments beyond normative practises by often engaging in homosexual activities.

Lahiri chooses to embrace in her novel what can be identified as the stylistic conventions of modernism and postmodernism. She follows a loose and fragmented style of modernist narration, blocks of testimonies that are apparent in Gauri, Subhash and Udayan's voices throughout the novels. There is heavy nostalgia from a constant practise of looking back to the past, and it is a story told almost entirely from multiple troubled memories. Nevertheless, there is some forced interaction between the chapters recounting the past and present lives, which lead to incoherent dissociation, a postmodern temporal distortion. Struggles are individual, yet there are frequent reference to the movements of India's Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) and subtle fictionalisation of revolutionaries Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar<sup>7</sup>, all of which reminds readers of postmodern literary techniques. Even in the stylistic presentation, there are infusions of multiple frameworks.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kanu Sanyal and Charu Majumdar were Indian communist politicians and main leaders of the Naxalbari uprisings in 1967. They were also the founding leaders of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

Similar subversions are found in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. The regular movement between spaces makes the readers suspicious of the centre-periphery model – Hiroko Tanaka is always an outsider to any of the place she settles in, but her sense of self is impossibly grounded. She does not inhabit multiple spaces at once; with every shift she removes herself contextually but also keeps true to her Japanese roots and identity. It is not an artificial fluidity that is imposed on the narration through textual conceits of modernism. It is, instead, a fluidity arising out of adjustments made in whatever context presents itself. This state of fluid “inbetweenness” does not only weaken conservative and modernistic notions of nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, feminism and terrorism, but it also perpetuates a restorative power of a postmodern fulfilment. Hiroko's positioning of herself can be best articulated in the words of Trinh Minh-ha, who feels that the moment an insider steps out from the inside, she cannot remain a mere insider anymore. “She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside [...and] she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure[...]Whether she turns the inside out or the outside in she is like the two sides of a coin, the same impure, both-in-one insider/outsider (Minh-ha 74-75). Hiroko's multi-dimensional approach towards cultures, languages, peoples and regional politics is very postmodern. The plot relies heavily on the adverse affects of globalisation. The lives of her loved ones become fatally entangled with anti-Soviet mujahideen, the Taliban, CIA and the widespread fear of terrorism evoked by Americanisation. Fundamentalist behaviours bring tragic deaths to Sajjad and Harry, and mobilises a manhunt for Raza's suspected involvement with Islamic terrorist groups.

Although it would appear that Hiroko's migrations are Eurocentric and that she has been othered by a model favouring the centre, the incentives behind her choices are not determined by modernist values, but by contemporary global fundamentalism. The novel being narrated in a third-person voice helps in establishing equal male and female

perspectives. As opposed to radical feminism, this demonstrates how the transnational practise of the women writing does not necessarily exclude men, patriarchy, global politics and cultural values from their own inherent realities.

In contrast, Tahmima Anam's heroine in *The Good Muslim* struggles against an ingrained patriarchy following the Liberation war of Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi novelist portrays the post-war rise of Islamic fundamentalism, tyrannical dictatorship in a new-born country and their effects on protagonist Maya's family. Her once-secular brother Sohail attempts to find peace in religiosity but is swept away by puritanical ideologies. The themes of this novel criticise some of the modernist binaries perpetuated by gender politics, patriarchal manipulation of religion, the silencing of women to attain a clean and linear national history, family values, the legitimacy of exile and return etc. As a practising doctor with liberal sensibilities, Maya is first seen rebelling against her brother Sohail's drastic conversion. She later attempts to bargain with him in order to bring about a circumstance tolerant of both religious and secular ideologies. It is towards the climax of the novel when she loses her nephew Zaid to fanatical 'huzoors' that there is an anticipation of a possible futility of her efforts. However, Anam also concludes the novel by bringing the perpetrators to justice years later. It leaves the readers hopeful of the negotiations of a strong-willed woman living in a transiting society. Because it is a text struggling to salvage identities in the intense nation-making power-play, the women contribute vitally in the reassertions of transnational arguments: the realities of women of this community cannot be compared with those who do not share the memories of colonial structures and the violence of unchecked patriarchy. The stylistic register of the narrative is also rather fragmented. Although told largely from the perspective of Maya, the plot shifts between different points in time, as though disjointed memories of the past finds itself irrevocably linked to the present. Unlike in modernist literature, this fragmentation does not depict an existential crisis in the narrator.

Maya's resilience and actions are firmly placed within the free-thinking precincts of her beliefs. There is nostalgia in her stream of thoughts but Anam also demonstrates that the chaos is insurmountable. By the assimilation of modern, post-colonial and postmodern aesthetics worked into the novel, the author is successful in detailing a difficult historical moment for women. Their experiences encompass borders of patriarchal suppression, national appropriation of women and the questions of familial roles – all of which signifies a literary form of transnational participation.

The counter-cultural lives, even by the South Asian standards, that we see led by women in these novels is not only a celebration of a 'liberated' self, but is also an emphasis on the multiplicity of a woman's role. Gauri is seen embodying all these roles at separate points in her life. She is an active revolutionist during her student days in India, which she gives up to become a doting wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. She is only able to discontinue her wife/mother role in Rhode Island, after which she takes up being a high career woman in academia. Hiroko Tanaka's role in *Burnt Shadows* is ultimate multi-national woman. As a Japanese translator from Nagasaki, she is linked to her British friends Weiss-Burtons couple through her association with German fiancé Konrad; she is married to Muslim Indian Sajjad during the Partition and becomes mother to Raza, a true citizen of Pakistan. Her later years also make her a pseudo-grandmother figure to American Harry's daughter Kim in the tension-fraught post-9/11 New York. These novels lend immaculate insight in transnational women experiences by portraying border lives of women and their consequent negotiations within their own unsettling spaces. However, *The Good Muslim* remains a novel very much centred on women's struggles with war and patriarchy at home. There is no transcending between borders, no cross-cultural migrations and returns. This novel successfully highlights the patriarchal and national interventions in the formation of the woman's reality in the early days Bangladesh. While there is hegemony exerted by the



condescending politics played by nationalistic and religious fanaticism, there are also instances of subversions which question the very ideals behind such fundamentalisms. The compromises made by women for such developments are also scrutinised. The following chapter will further examine the interfaces of the centre-margin binaries through discussions of women's altering realities. The location of the woman will remain central to the discussions. Through the readings of the novels, the chapter will also address the woman's engagement with nationalistic discourses and will further highlight moments of subversions within fixed models.

### Chapter 3

#### Politics of Location and Negotiations of Space in the Transnational Woman: Gauri and Hiroko

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.”<sup>8</sup>

These famous words by Virginia Woolf have been extended by Western feminists to justify the vision of a global sisterhood of women with shared values and hopes, irrespective of the location women occupy. One of the most important agendas addressed by transnational feminist critical mode is the politics of location. In the current era of globalization, diaspora and displacement, it has become crucial to inspect the politics attached to “location” and how it shapes the realities of women living under distinct conditions. As Homi Bhaba states in his book *The Location of Culture*, “it is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*.” The reason behind this is that circumscribed frameworks can no longer warranty for the present struggle to justify the “in-between” spaces produced in the articulation of cultural differences. It is also important to understand that the differences in women’s realities is due to a wide range of influential factors that are attached to the geographical positioning and are unique to cultural contexts. Migratory movements further problematize the examination of those contexts because experiences of displacement and diaspora (created by moving between places and cultures) bring in significant alterations for the individual in transit. The woman arriving at a destination brings with her the ingrained constructs of her own historical specificity and cultural baggage. She deploys this in her own negotiations of adjustments with the cultural context and receptivity of her host location. This cultural negotiation and absorption produces a ‘hybrid’ occupying a Third Space. And yet,

---

<sup>8</sup> This slogan by Virginia Woolf is taken off from *Three Guineas* (1938) where she explores the interconnection of patriarchal and fascist tyranny in face of women’s oppression in the society.

the individual experiences of the woman must not be overlooked in the rush to accommodate her into any theory on woman 'space'.

In this chapter I intend to highlight the importance of the woman's location in the perception of the space and reality she embodies. The politics of location behind the authors' positioning is also vital to what is projected in their novels. Therefore, I will examine the authors' locations and their influence on the corresponding spaces that are reflected in *The Lowland* and *Burnt Shadows*. My focus will be limited to the women protagonists' personal experiences of movements between places and cultures. I argue that these diverse experiences are highly relevant to the formation of fluid and unique identities in women.

Before entering into the discussion on how the politics of location is presented in the novels, it is important to understand the origins of examination. Politics of location emerged in the 1980's as a particularly North American feminist articulation of difference. It is a "method of interrogating and deconstructing the position, identity and privilege of whiteness," which also addresses racism and homophobia in the US women's movement and academic feminist discourses (Kaplan, 140). It began with Adrienne Rich's formulation of the concept when she travelled to a conference in Nicaragua as a delegate from the United States. The exposure to the women's realities there altered her perception of her own identity as a North American. Instead of conducting missionary attempts at dictating 'correct' feminist attitudes in other countries, she argued for U.S. feminists to mobilize around a broader range of issues. The answer to Rich's politics of location lies in her recognition that there are others marginalized by white Western women themselves. In her essay "Notes towards a Politics of Location," she says that "the movement for change is a changing movement, changing itself, de-masculinizing itself, de-Westernizing itself, becoming a critical mass that is saying in so many different voices, languages, gestures, actions: it must change, we ourselves can change it" (225). However, despite her efforts to "de-Westernize"

feminist movements, Rich remains locked within Western viewpoints of the global and local because of her “attachments to the conventional belief in travel as transformation”(Kaplan, 141). Her criticisms, therefore, only extended towards a re-examination of the “home”; the “away” is still subjective. Her theories resulted in the socio-cultural exploration of different cultural practices through broadened perspectives, but transnational feminists must note that it is also through her imagination of the “white” traveler that she initiates a cultural enquiry.

Although Rich’s understanding have failed to reflect some authentic identities from around the world, it has still been useful to draw many ideas that favor transnational feminist arguments. The claiming of a global vision of space for women raises temporal, spatial and historical. Kaplan feels that the politics of location is most useful in a feminist context when it is used to “deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term gender.” Nevertheless, she finds points of artifice within the common usage of the politics of location in feminist writing:

A politics of location is also problematic when it is deployed as an agent of appropriation, constructing similarities through equalizations when material histories indicate otherwise. Only when we utilize the notion of location to destabilize unexamined or stereotypical images that are vestiges of colonial discourse and other manifestations of modernity’s structural inequalities can we recognize and work through the complex relationships between women in different parts of the world (Kaplan 139).

Here, it is acknowledged that under transnational feminist practices, a politics of location can be adapted as a model of ‘coalition’ or ‘affiliation’ that can identify the grounds for “historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for

alliances” (139). Kaplan is not alone in her assessment. In “Feminist Encounters”, Chandra Mohanty also calls for a modified and extended practice of politics of location that includes the “historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries, which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition.” She asks, “how does location...determine and produce experience and difference as categories in feminist cross-cultural work?” (107) Since ‘universal’ ways of examining gendered oppressions tend to overlook categories of race and class, Mohanty feels it is necessary to historicize and locate the political forces involved in shaping the woman’s individual *experience*. This is why the positionality of the woman writer is extremely important in interpreting the space that is projected through her literary works.

The literary approach that I have adopted necessitates turning to fictional/non-fictional works by women writers and examines the politics of their location. To create alternative histories and identities by writing about the lives and space of women in different locations, novelists tend to reveal their own cultural burdens associated with the locations they occupy – burdens that add to the formation of diasporic identities. Therefore, the positionality of the writers is as important as the one written about. Kaplan examines the unique positionality of literary expression based on an exile’s marginal experiences. She looks at the tension-fraught location occupied by these writers possessing “oppositional consciousness” – the ability to read, write and comprehend culture on multiple levels that comes from moving between cultures, languages and various configurations of power. Although this position can potentially lock the subject away in isolation and despair, this can also unleash creative innovations. She uses Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s study of minor literature<sup>9</sup> and the term ‘deterritorialization’ to locate this moment of alienation and exile in

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Minor literature’ is characterized by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) as a literature written in the colonizer’s language by the formally colonized. What each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others are not in agreement.

language and literature. Kaplan feels that deterritorialization is caused by radical distancing between the signifier and signified. “Meaning and utterances become estranged,” she says. “This defamiliarization enables imagination, even if it produces alienation” (188). This imagination tends to produce another potential community, consciousness and sensibility. Hence, what Kaplan essentially emphasizes is the impact of positionality i.e. the writer’s distance from the centre, or vice versa. Women writing from within the interstices of masculine culture have always faced alienation and criticism. For women further away from the centre, this struggle is made problematic by the centre-margin differences (as mostly dictated by Western feminists) and postcolonial pressure in the construction of personal identities.

Many South Asian women fit the genre of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as minor literature. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kamila Shamsie demonstrate the postcolonial recognition of their language’s strategic values and they each made a strong contribution to literature. Their impressive careers provide evidence of not only their impeccable English writing skills, but also of the full extent of their individual cultural receptivity. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in the UK and raised almost entirely in the US, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Bernard College. She also received a Ph D in Renaissance Studies from Boston University while also teaching there. Similarly, Shamsie has also received higher education in the United States and had some teaching experience there. She is the author of several prize-winning novels: *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000) and *Kartography* (2002) won the hearts of millions. Shamsie is highly admired by her contemporaries for her quick wit and her craftsmanship with prose.

Even though the two authors come from similar backgrounds, they approach literature differently. Shamsie travels extensively but her love for home-city Karachi is

---

profound: “I knew its subtexts, its geography, its manifestations of snobbery and patriarchy, its passions, its seasonal fruits and their different varieties. I knew the sound of the sunset” (Shamsie, 2010). Nevertheless, in her works, the city is never isolated from international ties. In contrast to this, Lahiri’s signature themes deal with diaspora and her Indian roots. At a press conference in Calcutta, 2001, her confession vaguely reminds us of Virginia Woolf’s testament: “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile.” Her identity as a North American becomes destabilized because her stories strongly draw from her ties to her parents’ homeland. The subject matter of the authors’ texts, therefore, are proof of personal testimonies shaped by their own marginal perceptions of home, adulterated by the absorbed influence from the centre. It does *not* necessarily create an inaccurate picture of the peripheral reality; it is the reenactment of personal negotiation of space and an acknowledged infiltration of the centre. Such stories can become “the voice of testimonials that speaks for ‘her people’, speaks specifically about the experience of a particular person working for and within a particular group, in a particular period, in a particular country, centering around one person’s life/story, through which alliances can be made” (Carr 157). Through this sort of feminist writing, the stereotypical image of the local woman is challenged. For the transnational feminist discourse, such writings provide a valuable insight of the unsteady territory of diaspora in hybridized identities.

### **The Negotiations of “Location” and the Hybrid “Space” in *The Lowlands***

The experiences and realities of the immigrant woman located in the ‘centre’ are best portrayed by Lahiri. Her Bengali parentage and her upbringing in the United States squarely place her in the centre with her roots inescapably attached to the ‘periphery’. Therefore, the characters of her novels and short stories successfully present a double-sided outlook – an oppositional-consciousness – while living diasporic lives abroad. Those stories then become a

source of testimonies from women who do not ‘belong’, occupying a space between binaries – a Third Space of sorts. Growing up with linkages to different countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an ability to feel unaccepted. “It’s hard to have parents who consider another place ‘home’ – even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them,” she says.<sup>10</sup> “We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here (the U.S).” However, only familial ties to India are not enough to make India “home” for Lahiri either: “I didn’t grow up there, I wasn’t a part of things. We visited often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never full with us.” The clutching at an ‘out-of-reach’ time and place provokes in the author an anxiety that unsettles a fixed perception of the time and place she occupies. This apprehension of diaspora can be examined through Bhaba’s perspective of the transition from the familiar to the ‘beyond’:

Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement...here and there, on all sides, hither and thither, back and forth (*Location of Culture 2*).

It is, therefore, the movement between points A and B, and all simultaneous factors influencing the movement which causes a perplexity in the diasporic individual. Most critics detect an unenthusiastic approach to the diaspora in most of Lahiri’s works. However, my reading of *The Lowland* recognizes subversions of normative assumptions amidst the “disorientation” and “disturbance of direction”. It reveals certain flexibility within the central

---

<sup>10</sup> (Interview with Vibhuti Patel in Newsweek International, 20 September, 1999).



characters – in the renouncing of the abandoned motherland’s restrictive customs and in the venturing into a terrain inexperienced. Lahiri’s positionality as a ‘margin’ within the center is, in itself, an opportunity to revel in the multiplicity of her identity. Not only does her position as an outsider allows her to distinguish moments beyond the traditional norms, but it also guarantees moments of subversions.

Lahiri’s positionality is projected in protagonist Gauri from *The Lowland*. She is associated with two countries but belongs to neither. Her reality alters between change in locations, making her an exile to both her motherland and the United States. The space and distance are important aspects in the alteration of realities. Gauri takes refuge from her past in the spatial separation – the distance between Tollygunj and Rhode Island “shielded her more effectively than time,” causing moments to recede into invisible (152). Even her transit is as uncertain as the time and place travelled through. Nevertheless, there is manifestation of how the traumatizing move between locations can be ‘free’ or liberating: “On the plane, time had been irrelevant but also the only thing mattered; it was time, not space, she’d been aware of travelling through. She’d sat among many other passengers, captive, awaiting their destinations...free in an atmosphere not their own” (125). Gauri’s leaving India, determined by her husband’s pitiful death, came to her as relief: “No policeman or soldier stopped her. No one questioned her about Udayan. No one gave her trouble for having been his wife. No one prevented her from rising above the city, into a black sky without stars” (147). The separation from her homeland and her new-found liberation, therefore, is celebrated in the same bittersweet moment.

In turn, the hybridized space Gauri comes to occupy renders a powerful enabling territory where cultural meaning have no elemental unity. Although Bhaba sanctions the “hybrid” in the Third Space as a postcolonial concept, it is useful to explain Gauri’s tumultuous realities of migration. He posits hybridity as such a form of in-between space,

where “cutting edge of translation and negotiation” occurs and which he terms the *third* space (Bhaba, 1990). For him, the significance of hybridity is “not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the Third Space, which enables other positions to emerge.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation - “a way of describing a *productive*, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new *possibility*” (Bhaba 103). It is a space “of new forms of cultural meaning and production, blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity” (Meredith, 1998). Bhaba’s assessment of hybridity, therefore, becomes essential in questioning the assumptions of a static identity and to explain the multiple facets of an individual’s identity within a dynamic flux of cultural interactions. Through Gauri and Bela’s female experiences, we are given an account of two possible hybrids: Gauri’s character undergoes that cultural “translation” while also unintentionally keeping up her “genealogy of difference” that prevents her (despite her drastic course of actions) from becoming an integral part of the host culture. She represents the cultural hybrid which Homi Bhaba endorses. The transformation is gradual – at first Gauri resists living a fully functional life in Rhode Island; next she negotiates with her reality, first as Udayan’s widow and then as Subhash’s wife when her daughter Bela is born. It is after 12 years when she abandons them both does she fully rejects the baggage of her painful past to embrace a remote future alone in the U.S. This severing of ties, or her attempts at it, is voluntary and definite, even though there is a momentary return to it during her later years. Bela’s hybridisation, on the other hand, is different from her mother’s from the onset. Raised entirely in the United States by her stepfather, she receives minimal exposure to her Indian roots (her only visit to Calcutta with Subhash) and the rest is formulated by her own awareness as an Indian American. She was never forced to follow the cultural ethos of her parents. The life she lives is no stranger

---

<sup>11</sup> Rutherford, Jonathan. 1990. “The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha”

than a local American's, complete with a single-parent and strong sense of independence. The manner in which she frequently travels/works cross-country insinuates a willful detachment from her ties to "home" – which, in Bela's case, is Subhash. The hybrid in her is *involuntary*, picking up most influences from an American upbringing. Although her private space is not influenced by ethnic roots, Bela is still in constant search for completeness. "Her dedication to bettering the world was something that would fulfill her," Subhash imagines. She has "eschewed the stability he had worked to provide" by "forging a toothless path" to "discover meaning in her life", the same way Gauri has set out to do (225). Her diaspora is that of a second-generation Indian-American woman, who is totally American in her thoughts and actions, but not too far from encountering anxieties of her Indian birthright (fathered biologically by Udayan). Hence, Lahiri's subjects of diasporas are inescapably "snared in a process of transformation and repositioning of new identities – identities which are always in the process of becoming and transition but never complete" (Bahmanpour, 2010).

What also becomes evident in this novel is that the location determines the course of actions taken by each character. It is the curious flux of cultural, political, psychological influences within the ambivalent third space, which shapes the realities of the women in concern and often destabilizing a constructed image. Nevertheless, cultural-identity crisis in women do not always occur as an unexplained deficiency. It can also be "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference" (Hoogvelt, 1997). Therefore, it is in this celebration that we can also witness subversions of fixed stereotypes in women's experiences, as inscribed in Western discourses.

### ***Burnt Shadows: Hiroko's Celebration of the Fluid Self through Peace and Conflict***

The emerging cultural intelligence and celebration in female protagonist is highly obvious in my reading of Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. The prize-winning author of six novels comes from a family of women writers, and is one of the few Pakistani women writing in English. Unlike the strong voices of their Indian sisters, their positionality as writers is insecure. As expert on Pakistani culture Goher Khan puts it, "the paucity of women writers stems most likely from the 'dismally parochial and indiscriminatorily gendered systems of education, opportunity, modes of acculturation, and general devaluation of the arts,' hence making the work of existing Pakistani women writers even more valuable and momentous" (54). He further observes that such Pakistani writers (who are not necessarily residents in their original homelands any longer) "inhabits a unique space, providing its inhabitants with a contact zone that balances nationalism with internationalism" (Khan 55). Homi Bhaba terms this zone, as an "interstitial space," which is absolutely fundamental to the initiation of "new strategies of selfhood" and the formation of identity (*Location of Culture* 1-2). Shamsie's efforts facilitate collaboration and contestation, agreement and dissent. She also provide a site of potentially productive in-betweenness in the first and third worlds (Boehmer 2005)<sup>12</sup>. It would seem Shamsie wastes no words in her depiction of a woman's transnational experience. In *Burnt Shadows*, instead of portraying the experiences of a Pakistani woman by birthright, she takes a different twist by depicting the life of a Japanese woman *marrying* into the culture and *becoming* a Pakistani. Naturally, what is witnessed in the woman is an amalgamation of two cultural trends to project a third one.

Hiroko Tanaka, as a translator, is destined to cross over cultural, linguistic and national borders. She does not speak of conflicts generated by men but of those that are

---

<sup>12</sup> Cited in "The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns: Transnational Allegory and Feminist Rhetoric in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*." by Goher Karim Khan

perpetuated by her locations, which are fleeting and momentary refuges from the politics of the one before it. Shamsie's characters here can be seen as collective war victims, sharing a sense of homelessness. The Nagasaki bombing in 1945 claims Hiroko's family and her German fiancé Konrad; her separation from her friends the Burtons-Weiss couple is induced by the Indian partition in 1947, as is her inability to return to India afterwards; Hiroko is compelled to settle in Karachi with her husband Sajjad where she loses him to the undercover politics of the Afghan-Soviet conflicts of the Cold War period. The final pages of the novel find Hiroko's son Raza indisputably framed under suspicion of involvement with the September 9/11 attacks in New York. Such dramatic intervention of the century's most important events makes Hiroko a woman surviving not only the hegemonies of patriarchy, but also atrocities of war. Her character is almost ubiquitous, establishing a multiplicity of her own existence in a novel that transcends space, time and race. This uncommon third space allows her to be a fluid intervener and commentator of the politics within national boundaries, while also appreciating the cross-cultural associations she makes throughout her life.

This kind of fluid identity asserts a certain fragmentation, in which Bhaba prefers to recognize the importance of the self's alienation. "It is only by losing sovereignty of the self that you can gain the freedom of the politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference," he says. "The crucial feature of this new awareness is that it doesn't need to totalize in order to legitimate political action or cultural practice" ("The Third Space" 1990). However, in *Hiroko*, we do not see the diaspora and intense alienation that is more pronounced in Lahiri's female characters. From the very beginning, she remains firmly grounded in her 'self' and in the life choices she makes: Konrad cannot help but wonder that her mother "would have never approved of (her) starting up a romance with a German, or even walking alone with him through the hills of Nagasaki." He strongly doubts "that anyone,

even a revered mother, could have told Hiroko Tanaka what to do.” Hiroko justifies this with a question befitting their surrounding circumstance: “Why should rules of conduct be the only thing untouched by war?” (10) Yet her journeys across the world give birth to multiple facets to her identity, allowing her to be aware of, to embrace and to respect cultural differences seamlessly while keeping her own integral selfhood intact. Perhaps this is one of the many ways Hiroko unsettles the stereotypical image of a Third World war-victim woman. Her strong-willed existence and imperturbable ability to survive bomb-afflicted trauma surprise imperialist assumptions. British imperialist James Burton, for example, was “oddly perturbed by this woman who he couldn’t place. Indians, Germans, the English, even Americans...he knew how to look at people and understand the contexts from which they sprang. But this Japanese woman in trousers. What on earth was she all about?” (47-8)

Hiroko’s transitions between borders have not been easy. For example, her journey from Tokyo to New Delhi has been more about leaving than arriving:

“From Tokyo to here she had found momentum in momentum. She had not thought of destination so much as departure, wheeling through the world with that awful freedom of someone with no one to answer to. She had become, in fact, a figure out of myth. The character who loses everything and is born anew in blood...It was a fear of reduction rather than any kind of quest that had forced her way from Japan” (49).

Similarly, her migration to Karachi has been the result of a civil war she does not witness (the Burtons send Hiroko and Sajjad away to Istanbul during the Partition). However, she is fully aware of the displacement her Indian husband suffers from. Additionally, Karachi becomes the location to which Hiroko firmly anchors herself by raising her own family there. The Karachi that is represented in Shamsie’s novels is not for tourist brochures: “Through her characters we travel through the real Karachi: a city of billboards and street violence, floodlit

cricket matches, cheap wine, religious confusion and passionate conversation” (*The Telegraph* 2005). This is the same Karachi projected through Hiroko eyes. No matter how painful the driving force to Karachi has been for her, there is no agonizing diaspora from the past, but a fond reminiscence creeping into the pages describing her years there. Although she never allows nostalgia to overcome her life, it was her son’s adolescence days that evoked in her “the desire to walk behind time” and catch up to the times during her Raza’s younger and sweeter days. However, it is also here that Hiroko Tanaka loses her family. Through the heroine’s family experiences, Shamsie allows her readers a peek into the untrustworthy political climate in 1980’s Pakistan. With the help of his hybrid (in full sense of the word) appearance, Hiroko’s teenage son Raza playfully guises himself as an Afghan mujahedeen, and takes the joke too far by disappearing in one of the camps on the Pakistani border. In attempts to retrieve their son, Sajjad ends up being a casualty of covert accidents from the Cold War conspiracies in Pakistan. She is again displaced by her migration from Karachi to New York, where she continues her friendship with her old friends Japanese Yoshi Watanbe, German Ilse Weiss and her American granddaughter Kim. What is most admirably portrayed is a woman having experienced multiple migrations remains transnationally connected to places, people and ideologies.

This final repositioning reminds us that her present location determines her consequent reality as a survivor. She does not crack under the tensions induced through continual relocation and homelessness. Through her life, Shamsie narrates a possible story of women bordering between multiple identities, “spaces”, locations and politics – through which a thorough subversion of the ‘Third World woman’ image takes place.

## Chapter 4

### Women's Interaction with Nationalism and Religion: Transnational Realities

Transnational feminist approaches towards gendered differences delineate an understanding that women in different locations experience hegemonic oppressions in different degrees. This is so because hegemonies like patriarchy are not identically exercised everywhere in the world. It is imperative to emphasize the contextual differences in sexual practise, family values, national characteristics, gender roles etc. in diverse places – differences that are essential to women identities in general. Aspiring transnational feminists Grewal and Kaplan believe that part of any feminist self-examination “necessitates a rigorous critique of emerging orthodox.” Although every postcolonial feminist feels compelled to address the race-class-gender trinity in their self-examinations, Grewal and Kaplan think that it “delimits the range of discussion around women's lives.”(*Scattered Hegemonies* 19)

Therefore, feminists must also consider other categories of issues and subject formation both within and outside the borders of First World feminist formulations. As already discussed in the previous chapters, the old “sisterhood” model of Eurocentric missionary work (of intervention and salvation of women from patriarchal structures) is unmistakably tied to older “models of centre-periphery” relations. Grewal and Kaplan assert that that these models have become “obsolete” in face of the growing multiple centres and peripheries. Feminists now need new modes of analyses that tap into gender in a dynamic panorama of “globalisation, countermeasures of new nationalisms and ethnic and racial fundamentalisms.” They further suggest that the scattered hegemonies can be mapped by linking diverse local practises to “formulate a transnational set of solidarities” (19).

This chapter will address the patriarchal intervention of national and religious politics in the lives of women as portrayed in *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim*.



Since transnational feminist practises argue for an assessment of modernity, and because modernity has participated predominantly within nationalist discourses, it becomes important to include critiques of nationalism and consequent rise of fundamentalisms in feminist readings. The woman's image under the First-World construct has also been defined by nation-making processes. Using examples from the novels, I intend to draw attention to points of conformation and subversion of the image under the duress of external interference. The multiple roles exhibited by female characters in the novels help break mainstream speculations by the First World.

It is important to understand that nationalism is a historical construct rather than a manifestation of some unchanging essence. By equation, then, the relationship between the nation and the woman is also a construction. Any linkage connecting the nation and woman immediately brings to mind historian Partho Chatterjee's postcolonial analysis of the Indian placement of women in a dichotomy perpetuated by nationalistic ideals.<sup>13</sup> The modernist formulations of outer/inner binaries (men are parts of the outer, materialistic domain and women make up the pure, spiritual interior of the Indian home) are appropriation of Western ideas to contribute to progressive "reforms" of the Indian culture. This is identified as one effective method of keeping women away from power systems. Nationalism is capable for "producing a *different* discourse marked by political contests and struggles for power." (Chatterjee 1986) Thus, it comes as no surprise that most of the adaptations of this discourse and its relation to woman cater to specific masculine traditions. This remains true for many cases outside the Indian culture, which is why the outer/inner dichotomies are important points for reference when examining the gender dynamics in a state.

---

<sup>13</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India." *American Ethnologist*: 622-33. Print

It is also essential to distinguish other active patriarchal tools in women subordination. Feminists have always recognised the medium of religion as a patriarchal ally – current times focus more on Islam than other streams of faith because of the public constraints exercised on women’s lifestyles, and also of the “concrete meanings” attached to the veil or *pardah*. Grewal and Kaplan think that there is “a dire need to examine fundamentalisms around the world and seek to understand why Muslim fundamentalism appears in the media today as the primary progenitor of oppressive conditions for women” when other forms of extreme fundamentalisms also exert profound control over women’s lives” (19). As Leila Ahmad<sup>14</sup> points out in her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, misinterpretation of discourse has some role to play in it.

The peculiar practises of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam. A detailed history of Western representations of women in Islam and of the sources of Western ideas on the subject has yet to be written, but broadly speaking it may be said that prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Western ideas about Islam derived from the tales of travel-readings of poorly understood Arabic texts (Ahmad 149).

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies the Western approach that takes place in the construction of the veiled woman image: “By equating *pardah* with rape, domestic violence and forced prostitution, sexual control etc. function as the primary explanation of *pardah*, whatever the context.”<sup>15</sup> As the equation pays no heed to culture, customs and socio-historical contexts, Western discourses assume a totalising oppression for all veiled women everywhere. Such representations are also present in writings by many South Asian women

---

<sup>14</sup> Leila Ahmad is an American Egyptian writer on Islam and Islamic feminism.

<sup>15</sup> Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*: 61. Print.

writers educated in the West. Nevertheless, their narratives can also detect realities that differ from the mainstream assumptions of women living under conditions invoked by religious fundamentalism. A later point in this chapter will discuss the multiple ways women negotiate with religion in Tahmima Anam's novel *The Good Muslim*.

### **Women and Nationalism in *The Lowland* and *Burnt Shadows***

Feminist readings of *The Lowland* reveal Jhumpa Lahiri's delicate subversions of hegemonic constructs. The diverse lives of her female protagonists demonstrate the possible failures of rigid nationalistic and gendered binaries. Other than the diasporic essence of the Indian women living in the U.S., Lahiri adds a terrain that explores the unlikely parts played by women in 'conservative' India while interpreting a problematic trajectory of the country's history. The plot begins to thicken at a period that is already witnessing failures of nationalism – the Naxalite movement is mobilised by the rising peasant groups, for whose humanitarian rights the Calcutta intellectual youth (such as Udayan) has compensated many lives. The word "Naxalite" became a term for describing a movement of social radicals fighting the Indian government on behalf of India's oppressed and poor working class. This fight begins as a struggle for land rights and with the split of the Indian Communist Party in 1964. Although the novel only sketchily covers the progress of the movements from behind a curtained screen and through occasional flashbacks of Udayan's involvement, it also provides an insight of how women participated in the revolution.

Gauri's dedication to the subaltern movement renders her place in the society to become detached and uncertain. Her participation was at first voluntary, when she attended the student meetings after class with her brother and Udayan. The end of the novel discloses that her involvement was deeper than she realised: Udayan asked her to run covert errands, to be a look-out naturally disguised as a young wife, deliver notes to other active female

revolutionists like Chandra. Unsurprisingly, all the seemingly innocent activities ultimately lead to bloody retaliations in other parts of the city, killings for which Gauri feels guilty. Yet there is a deliberate separation from the action and Gauri feels “chained” to a movement she cannot see. She is expected to live a pseudo-regular life as a new housewife but also contribute actively in ideals behind her husband’s decisions. The separation prevents her from fitting in completely in Udayan’s world, and her social peculiarities prevent her from blending in with her orthodox in-laws. Even as a girl born and raised in India, she remains aloof from traditional social customs. Detached both emotionally and physically from her large family, whom she loses in a road accident, she is only left with her brother Manash. Gauri’s unconventional life fascinates Udayan: “her birth in the countryside, her willingness to live apart from her parents, her estrangement from most of her family, her independence in this regard” (57). She cannot be pressurised into getting married, like the other girls of her society, and elopes with Udayan. Her social peculiarities prevent her from blending in with her orthodox in-laws. However hard she tries to fit in, Gauri does not belong to either the “inner” or “outer” domains of the Indian mould for women’s place.

It is after Udayan’s death that she is temporarily forced into a domain entirely reclusive from the society – the woman without her male counterpart. In not too many words, Lahiri also scores in on the nation’s cultural take on the widowed woman and her consequent social death:

For ten days after his death there were rules to follow... the vermilion was washed clean from her hair, the iron bangle removed from her wrist... After the mourning period ended her in-laws began to eat fish and meat again, but not Gauri. She was given white saris in place of coloured ones, so that she resembled the other widows in the family (108-109).

Widows of the Indian culture have long faced social elimination after their husbands' deaths. The grief itself is elongated by the pervading customs of isolation, but Gauri rejects the normative practise. She does not embody the national "purity" associated with the woman. She marries her brother-in-law against his parents' wishes and bears Udayan's child. The stigma continues to surround the widowed woman in their society, but Subhash becomes an icon of changing social attitudes towards women. Gauri's ultimate denunciation of female conventional roles in the Indian nationalistic discourse dissolves the binaries that sustain it.

Likewise, In *Burnt Shadows*, nationalism remains a dubious concept. As a woman who has to switch between nations throughout her life, Hiroko Tanaka remains most sceptical of nationalism. Her body has been literally scarred in violence afflicted by conflict between states. As Gohar Karim Khan argues, "her physical body serves as a manuscript upon which national and political upheavals are literally and metaphorically transcribed, reflecting the novel's demonstration of women's bodies as sites of conflict between nationalism and colonialism" (Khan 54). The bird-shaped scars on her back afflicted by the Nagasaki bomb are marks of a "masculine" war, infusing her mother's cherished feminine Kimono silk with her skin. The woman, therefore, stands victim to national and international violence. This, however, does not confine Hiroko into a static victim status. In spite of the bodily violence, her willingness to move between borders breaks certain barriers asserted by the process of victimisation. Chun Fu comprehends the free movements of the various characters of the novel as a testimonial of the "transnational phenomenon and the consequent annulment of national borders, which cannot be dissociated with the spectre of the nation-state, i.e., the violence par excellence" (Fu 2013). Since the end of the WWII, Hiroko makes her presence in various conflict zones: the 1947 Partition, the Afghanistan fighting against the Soviet in the Cold War period, and the attack on the US on September 11, 2001. Despite this ordeal, Hiroko embraces multiple nations linguistically, socially and emotionally. She accepts Delhi

whole-heartedly in a manner her imperial hosts in the Burton household do not. In Hiroko's atypical nationalistic perspectives and her desire to assimilate into an alien environment, Khan depicts a "stark contrast" with the Weiss-Burton family, especially to patriarchal figure, James Burton. With her very presence in a "predominantly masculinist society of colonial India, where women were consciously denied any voice or agency in colonial or anti-colonial discourse...Hiroko disrupts this unequal, yet hitherto unquestioned, balance of power" (Khan 59). It is, thus, in her cultural interactions that she weakens much of the colonial authority over women in her settings.

Regardless of the numerous exposures to national emergencies, Hiroko's transnational reality comes from conciliation with the nation, not conflict. Her marriage into a Muslim patriarchal culture has also been a long series of negotiations – "between his (Sajjad) notion of a home and social space and her idea of it as a private retreat; between his belief that she would be welcomed by the people they lived among if she wore their clothes, celebrated their religious holidays, and her insistence that they would see it as false and had to learn to accept her on her own terms; between his determination that a man should provide for his wife and her determination to teach"(132). Hiroko's happy marriage is evident of not only her dignified flexibility but also of the success of her negotiations with nationalism and patriarchy. Her sense of nationalism does not claim lofty attachments to Japan; she always wanted to leave Nagasaki because of the external violence attached to her time and place. It is after when she leaves Japan that she claims "until you see a place you've known your whole life reduced to ash you don't realise how much we crave familiarity" (100). Only then do we detect nostalgia in Hiroko for the familiarity and longing for a nation. Her son Raza, on the other hand, is caught up between his mixed Indian-Japanese identity, and asserts his confusion through nationalism and Islamic consciousness. On one occasion, he lashes out at his mother: "I can't ask any of my friends home...with you walking around, showing your

legs. Why can't you be more Pakistani?" Raza's national anxiety seeks solace in its projection on his mother's body. To soothe his insecurities, Hiroko temporarily takes to wearing modest salwar-kameezes. Although she is amused to find their son's teenage rebellion asserting itself through nationalism, she is also aware that there is no "myth" bigger than nationalism (130).

Hiroko's interaction with religious fundamentalism is impersonal, yet it plays a large role in her family's life. Dealing with Islam falls under one of her cultural negotiations, which is neither oppressive nor insignificant. Her individual relationship with religion is romantic and tender; there is no hostile oppression and backlash. She converts, but only for Sajjad's social comfort. She is not expected to perform religious duties, but she loves to "hear the echoes of Arabic<sup>16</sup> dropping gently into the courtyard like a lover stealthily entering a home, undaunted by the knowledge that today again his beloved will turn him away – her rejection of him (*call for prayer*) so oft and tenderly repeated, it becomes an expression of steadfastness equal to his" (217). Hence, Hiroko represents an unoppressed woman in patriarchal Pakistan who is not subjected to religious intolerance – a rare but equally important contribution to transnational experiences in literature. Shamsie's stance on religion is a liberal one, but her plot illustrates how rising fundamentalism and international politics destroy her family. Raza's continuous failure in only that one Islamic Studies subject keeps him from qualifying for law school. It is a comment on how the government's insertion of religion in every form of education is systemised, losing the personal devotion behind its practises. There is also glimpses of the tolerant and believing women in Sajjad's pious mother who, even "with her most intimate relationship with Allah, would have knocked on the door of the Army House and told the President he should have more shame than to ask all the citizens to conduct their love affairs with the Almighty in the open"(147). Shamsie also

---

<sup>16</sup> Muslim call for prayers at dawn

attempts to provide an alternate side to the tricky post 9/11 Islamophobia in the United States by humanising Muslim activist Abdullah (Raza's companion from his teenage adventures in the Afghan borders). Hiroko's eager participation to help Abdullah escape authority costs her son freedom. The protagonists' doom arises from discord between personal peace and perpetuated politics by global fundamentalism.

### **National and Religious Fundamentalism in *The Good Muslim***

Tahrima Anam's distillation of nationalistic ideals in *The Good Muslim* is different than Lahiri and Shamsie's, in respect to patriarchal correlation with power. Although the 1971 Liberation war forms a crucial part of the narrative, Anam invests heavily in the sections set in the mid-80's, a time during which hegemonic assertions of nationalism is at its peak. This novel profoundly depicts the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that goes hand-in-hand with the nation-state values, and the vulnerability of women and children under such conditions. Abeda Sultana analyses the women subordination and patriarchal structures in Bangladesh. She finds that gender inequality is practised sustained meticulously through the biased interpretations of religion and nationalism:

The main causes of women's subordination are the negative impact of tradition, religion, patriarchy, seclusion or *purdah* and paternalistic attitudes in the socio-economic and legal spheres. But among these factors patriarchy is the prime cause and other causes are the by-product of patriarchy. As because the main problem of subordination is not really religion or tradition, but patriarchal influence and authority, it is men who have interpreted religion, moulding it and perpetuating the patriarchal domination which has strong links with the issue of gender inequality (Sultana 2010).



The only possible way to overcome such oppression is by raising the position of the woman in a society identified by its patrilineal descent. Anam's narrative plays a strong role in providing an alternative story of women who do not readily give in to subordination. In an interview with NPR's Linda Wertheimer from the BBC studios in London, Anam talks about the untraditional role projected through her protagonist. Maya is a "fiercely independent character who can't come to terms with her brother's new found faith and ideology, experiencing the freedoms of fighting in her own country's war, helps her emerges with a strong sense of her identity as a woman." She becomes a doctor and an activist, roles that, as Anam points out, strain against the traditional roles of women — and not just women in the Muslim world: "Even though she comes from this very conservative society ... she espouses a lot of the hopes and dreams that women all over the world have, including in the Western world" (Anam 2011).

Not surprisingly, Maya responds very differently to Islamic fundamentalism and the directions taken by Bangladesh under the autocratic rule of Mohammed Ershad (referred as the "Dictator" throughout the text). She remains loyal to her idea of secular and Marxist-influenced nationalism, which provided a hopeful sense of solidarity during the tumultuous war years. As a woman, she is a strong-willed dissident to patriarchal oppression. Instead of pursuing her early ambitions in surgical training, Maya travels to Rajshahi and becomes a 'lady-doctor' so that she can counter patriarchal superstitions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Despite her efforts to educate the rural people for years, she always encountered obstructions by religious men in the village. One such occasion presented itself when her pregnant friend Nazia wanted to cool off in the pond in the scorching heat of the hottest summer:

"There were rules about pregnant women, about where they could bathe, but Maya brushed them aside. She had been lecturing them for years now, about

science, superstitions and their rights... The men of the village had appeared in front of the house, shaking their heads. A pregnant woman in the pond? It was too much” (18).

Later when Nazia gave birth to a child with Down’s Syndrome, her husband Masud turns on her and denounces the infant and saying that it was not his. “One hundred and one lashes<sup>17</sup>,” he tells her. “That’s what you deserve... He looks like a Chink – did you fuck a Chinese, wife?” He told the men. They had known something was wrong...since the day she and the lady doctor had gone swimming in the pond” (22). Maya fails to protect Nazia from the “punishment” by the local religious men folk and is compelled to leave the village. At a later point in the novel, Maya was abducted and then tortured in the Central Jail when she rebels against zealous huzoors to retrieve her nephew Zaid from the rural madrasah. The position of women in the conservative radical Islamic culture of rural mid80’s Bangladesh is not only secondary to men, but they are also perpetual victims of patriarchal tyranny. No matter the degree of success, Maya is still seen persistently resisting this tyranny.

This novel also discloses the horrors of the Pakistani rape camps and how Bengali women were sexually exploited by the thousands. As Sikita Banaerjee<sup>18</sup> points out, the woman’s intersection with nationalist discourse may present itself through constructed ideas of honour. It is a continuation of Partho Chatterjee’s nationalistic model, in which women are correlated with the pure, spiritual domain. This is why, in many contexts, “women symbolize national honour, thus any act (e.g., rape) that defiles and violates women’s bodies becomes a political weapon aimed at destroying the enemy nation’s honour” (Banarjee 2003). An

---

<sup>17</sup> Punishment for adultery under the Islamic law is 100 lashes.

<sup>18</sup> Sikita Banerjee is Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Victoria, Canada and author of *Warriors in Politics: Hinduism, Nationalism, Violence, and the Shiv Sena in India* and *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*.

official account by International Crimes Strategy Forum (ICSF)<sup>19</sup> describes the war-ridden scenario of the new country, and it claims that the government statistics of 200,000 rapes is a conservative number:

Geoffrey Davis (UNFPA, WHO, IPP), a medical graduate from Australia arrived in Bangladesh in March 1972...He interviewed many Pakistani POWs who were behind bars at a prison in Comilla. These interviews revealed that they were under instructions from the top brass of the Pakistan army that a good Muslim was duty bound to fight anyone other than his father. This prompted them to impregnate as many Bengali women as they could so that there would be a whole generation of children in East Pakistan born with West Pakistani blood (ICSF 2014).<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, Bengali women formed an integral part of the scheme to prevent a clean break from the Pakistani oppression. This is a fine example of how patriarchal violence and manipulation of religious tools diffuse into the national discourse. Whether it is impregnation or abortion, the woman's body is treated as a state vessel of masculine and racial honour. Media research expert Buddhadeb Haldar deems the sexual violence of 1971 as an act of genocide, because it did more than end lives. In a feature editorial, he writes that rape becomes "a political tool" predominantly important in cultures that "strongly emphasize the chastity and virginity of women." By taking away her sexual morality "that is believed to belong to a man and the entire community," rape, thus, becomes the "the final evidence of how a man has failed as a warrior and a protector" (*The Daily Star* 2012). Hence, the power-struggle is a very masculine one, in which women are bodily targets for the operation to

---

<sup>19</sup> International Crimes Strategy Forum (ICSF) is an independent global network of experts, activists and organizations, established with the purpose to understand, research, and support the justice process initiated to end impunity, establish rule of law, and ensure accountability for the international crimes committed in 1971 in Bangladesh.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in "1971 Women Victims: Violated and Forgotten." *Bdnews24.com* 10 June 2014, The Opinion Pages sec. Print.

belittle or humiliate men of the opponent race. This further shows how the women are no less than commodities in a patriarchal power-struggle.

The strategized forceful impregnation resulted into the numerous war babies that were aborted in the post-Liberation period. Maya experiences a complex form of guilt when her nationalist sympathy compels her to perform countless abortions. She tries convincing herself of the duty to her nation, when consoling Sohail, "It's all right, Bhaiya, it was the right thing to do. It was a just war, a right war. For us, for our freedom" (249). The disappointment is profound when she realises that the country's fight for a free nation is overcome by the political alliances with the growing authority of fundamentalism. During the war, she follows Mujib (founder leader of the liberation movement) unquestioningly. Her faith, however, falters when the leader hails the raped women as "heroines" while also declaring "an erasure of the bastard children from war-time abuse", with no regard to the women's bodies or personal feelings in the matter (Chambers 2015). Anam upholds this aspect of extremist national politics with Piya's story. She personalises a rape victim carrying a bastard child in her womb when she arrives at Haque residence. It was in her hesitancy to proceed with the abortion and her disappearance that forces Maya to reassess her own naive devotion towards nationalism. She begins to feel that with every abortion she performs, her ethical "debt" is "rack(ing)" up against the ones she brings into the world. Down the years, in a letter to the *Observer*, Maya admits her guilt: "None of us is completely free of responsibility – not when we live in a country that is a living example of what we fought against" (226). In her disappointment lies the futility of a constructed nationalism.

Furthermore, in her analysis of the novel, Claire Chambers finds that Anam also destabilises the simplistic barriers of religion, that draw between the 'good' and the 'bad' Muslim. Sohail's turn towards Islam after his return from war and his consequent withdrawal causes his family pain and neglect. The makeshift roof for congregation occupies nearly all

his time, attention and devotion. His ability to become a good son, brother and father is compromised by his dedication to become a good Muslim. A careful reading of the text will also reveal a number of possible realities in the representation of women in Islam. Although the novel looks at victims of religious zeal, a certain mystification surrounds the religious practises that take place in the “upstairs” quarters. While Nazia is subjugated violently in Rajshahi, the congregation represent women who *consent* to participate in the dogmatic discourse. The burkha-clad women and their univocal chanting bring to mind of cult rituals. Sohail’s late wife Silvi is sketched out as an inflexible woman who is rigid in her beliefs and her practise of Islam. The blame behind Sohail’s radical conversion and Maya’s leaving Dhaka falls squarely on her shoulders. It is against her that Maya revels in her own secular identity. When Sohail does not allow his neglected son to receive any form of schooling or education other than Arabic and Islamic studies, it further triggers Maya’s own secular myopia and extremist tendencies. Thus there is a natural aversion to Islam on her part. At the same time, Maya is also cynical of spiritually detached women at the lavish party, of the extravaganza and the “Chiffon-saree” women with their alcohol-drinking men, and of their frivolous “Innalillah” and “Alhamdulillah” (59). She identifies the pretence in these individuals with religious hypocrisy throughout the novel.

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

Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of

colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies (*Women and Gender in Islam* 152).

It is, hence, in the mystification of the practises that renders Islam a misunderstood faith. Perhaps one reason behind Maya sympathising with such ideals may arise from her family's attraction to Western literature. However, it is also arguable that she does not react favourably to the religious fervour of her local setting because she is aware of the patriarchal dogma behind the cultural appropriations of Islam. Her ardent condemnation for religious practises is made unsteady when she learns of a softer side to her late sister-in-law – Silvi used to play Ludu with her son Zaid and wanted him to attend school, contrary to her husband's wishes. Maya's encounter with women of the congregation is varied and conflicted too – sister Khadija is more severe in her religious preaching, but she is described by a fellow infrequent member as “a heartless woman” who “believes every word she says (*herself*).” Maya is impressed with the practicality of Rokeya's sister. She wears a light veil for the cultural application more so than religious ones, and is someone who refuses to “follow someone like a mule” (235).

Readers thus encounter a variety of women interacting differently with religion – the forcefully subjugated, the unforgiving preacher, the blind follower, the logical recipient of Islamic teachings, the hypocrite and the sceptic. But it is through Maya's mother, Rehana, that we view an open-minded practise of Islam. Amidst the women either acclaiming or declaiming religion, Rehana is portrayed as an idiosyncratic character who loves both poetry by Rumi and as well as Quranic verses. Chambers notes that “her Sufistic version of Islam is never categorically defined as Sufi, nor do we see her venerating saints or their shrines, as is common practise” (148). She watches American TV shows like *Magnum, P.I.* on BTV but also whispers Surahs over new tree-roots. When Sohail returns shell-shocked from the war, she simply reads from the Quran to calm him. There is more reference of her everyday lived

Islam in Anam's prequel *The Golden Age* but she can be identified in the author's perception of a 'good' Muslim woman struggling to raise her children in a war-ridden country – one “who is non-violent, ideally non-hijab wearing, educated, working outside the home, and in a love-marriage” while respecting other people's choice to live differently than her. (Chambers 148) Rehana's liberal adaptations of Islam in a Muslim society reflect a contemporary dimension of women's urban reality in Bangladesh.

Transnational feminist readings of the novels, therefore, disclose the importance of circumstance and *difference* in women's interaction with nationalism and religion. It is through these characters that Anam demonstrates how much of the borders between different practises of religion are, in Chambers's words, “artificially drawn and damaging”. Shamsie's plot signifies how troubled wars and national politics leave a shaky position for everyone involved: the nationalist, the religious, the liberalist and the ones stuck in between. Even for the one travelling between borders and proclaiming multiple national identities, the woman does not escape her diasporic anxieties. Lahiri's heroine embodies the anxiety while Shamsie essentially shows how it further binds the woman to her roots in ways that can provide an alternate facet with which she negotiates her current reality. It is thus imperative to reinstate the cultural differences in women's positioning and her consequent negotiations with nationalism, culture and religion to break away from the stereotypical images of women supplied by a global vision.

## Conclusion

Transnational feminist practice in literature is not a new concept. Its origins were forged in postcolonial movements, but it is only in the postmodern recent times that feminists are recognizing its magnitude and mobilizing around it. While formulating their ideas to endorse transnational articulation of feminist expression, Grewal and Kaplan were searching for ways to deepen the analysis of gender in relation to multiple issues that affect women's lives. This dissertation attempted to lay out only a few of the abundant issues shaping the realities of women living in diverse locations.

The challenges faced by transnational feminist tradition in the literary academia lies in combating the hegemonic discourses of representation. Whether it is a completely Western representation or a mediated one, feminists must be cautious of its production and of the power relations between the key concepts enforcing it. This is why broad-spectrum theoretical frameworks cannot fully account for the lives that are self-presented. In order to explain narratives produced by women under transnational light, feminists must be open to the idea of theoretical overlap and *selective borrowing* from existing dominant frameworks (both the stylistic and aesthetic traits). The transnational agenda, however, cannot allow for the superimposition of any complete framework on textual subjects. As a result, unique trends of reading, writing and interpretations of literature are created. In this dissertation, I argued that the postmodern stream is a facilitator of the transnational feminist project, mostly because of its characteristic treatment of de-centered multiplicity and its approval of coexisting cultural paradigms. The emerging works can, therefore, hope to inspire a more inclusive framework, which will embrace the cultural, historical and racial aspects of the lives of the women in concern.



By focusing on novels *The Lowland*, *Burnt Shadows* and *The Good Muslim*, I attempted to illustrate a South Asian context of transnational women's culture presented through fiction. The authors portrayed a wide range of subjects that formed the circumstantial realities of the female protagonists. My discussions are limited to the evaluation of these women's locations and how it develops the psychic space they come to occupy. The cross-cultural movements and spatial journeys render a diaspora in them that, contrary to popular belief, may not always be problematic. As a response to the movement and corresponding diaspora, the women are seen to embody multiple identities which would not have surfaced if they remained in static positions. Their cultural interaction and personal negotiations demonstrate a fluidity in their own beings, which contributes heavily to the subversions of stereotypical imaginations of the Third World women in Western discourses. This paper, thus, aimed to identify some of the redeeming features caused by transition.

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

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

Like all streams of theoretical practice, the transnational feminist tradition has also drawn criticism. For example, diasporic issues in transnational studies take in its assessment the women's experiences in a foreign setting, which reduces the prospects of addressing diasporic experiences at home. Gayatri Spivak is somewhat skeptical of the transnational woman moving between cultures. In her article "Diasporas Old and New", she distinguishes between the 'old' diasporas (results of oppression by war, slavery, trade and conquest) and the 'new' ones (results from Eurocentric migration, labour export, men and women seeking political asylum) to imply that most migratory choices are Eurocentric. In her view, transnationality shrinks the possibilities of social and gender redistribution in developing countries, or in other words, at home (Gayatri 6). However, her thoughts run parallel with Grewal and Kaplan's battle against the "epistemic violence"<sup>21</sup> in Western discourses. Although Spivak encourages the intentions behind the project's ambition, she is also critical of its success. Her doubts fall back on her concerns regarding subaltern women voices within a civil society. The process poses danger of the writer assuming a political authority over the subaltern (or the power subordinate in a civil context), which further reinstates the subaltern's subordinate position. She is worried that even the most benevolent attempts to give voice to the silenced repeats the very silencing it intends to combat. Therefore, the question then arises, are the subaltern women voices really heard? Despite the intent behind the movement, it is still dubious whether or not intellectuals can really avoid the potential danger.

My own analysis concludes that, in the face of the concerns raised by Spivak, transnational feminist modes of interpretation still provides a potential terrain for raising

---

<sup>21</sup>Spivak's term "epistemic violence" means the infliction of harm against subjects through discourse.

unheard voices. Women from all kinds of backgrounds must be encouraged to put forth their own stories in the emerging field of literature, so that the silenced individuals amongst them find a scope to present themselves. Questions, as asked by Spivak, must remain central to our enquiry of transnational feminist discourses. Or else we will end up recreating the same hegemonies that were perpetuated by Western feminist frameworks. My dissertation has focused on very specific thematic points in relation to explore the woman through transnational lens. Nevertheless, it is essential to realize that none of the themes can be discussed in isolation of the numerous others, and that the study must continue its exploration. Only then can the inherent complexity of women's defining realities across the world can be comprehended. If, however, focusing on the precise themes of various interrelated elements was able to project some small degree of the larger truth in a transnational feminist reading, then I will have considered myself successful.

### Works Cited Page

- Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Yale UP, 1992. Print.
- Anam, Tahmima. "Novelist Tahmima Anam Asks: Who Is 'The Good Muslim?'" BBC interview. 1 Jan. 2011.
- Anam, Tahrima. *The Good Muslim*. Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashan, 2011. Print.
- Bahmanpour, Bahareh. "Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies." *Studies in Literature and Language* 1.6 (2010): 43-51. Print.
- Banerjee, Sikita. "Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India." *Women's Studies International Forum* 26.2 (2003): 167-79. Print.
- Barrett, Miche. "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience" by Chandra Talpade Mohanty." *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1992. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Cultures in Between" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Bhaba, Homi. "Introduction to Locations of Culture." *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Carr, Robert. "Crossing the First World/Third World Divides." *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1994. Print.
- Chambers, Claire, and Caroline Herbert. "Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* – Bangladeshi Islam, Secularism and Tablighi Jamaat." *Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion, Representation*. Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India." *American Ethnologist*: 622-33. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Delhi: Oxford University

Press, 1986. Print.

Chun, Fu. "Nagasaki and Cosmopolitanism in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*." A *Crossover Initiative toward Sustainable Socio-Cultural Coexistence in East Asia*.

Ilan U, 2013. Print.

Deluze, Gilles, Felix Guattari, and Robert Binkley. "What Is a Minor Literature?" *Mississippi Review* 11.3 (1983): 13-33. Print.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices." *Jouvert* 5.1 (2000): 4-7. Print.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1994. Print.

Haldar, Buddhadeb. "Rape in 1971 -- an Act of Genocide." *Forum - a Monthly Publication of Daily Star* 1 Sept. 2012. Print.

Hoogvelt, Ankie M. M. *Globalization and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print.

ICSF. "1971 Women Victims: Violated and Forgotten." *Bdnews24.com* 10 June 2014, The Opinion Pages sec. Print.

Kaplan, Caren. "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* 6 (1987): 187-98. Print.

Kaplan, Caren. "The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice." *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1994. Print.

Khan, Goher Karim. "The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns: Transnational Allegory and Feminist Rhetoric in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*." *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 3.2 (2011). Print.

- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland: A Novel*. Random House India, 2013. Print.
- Mattelart, Armand. *Transnationals & the Third World: The Struggle for Culture*. S. Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1983. Print.
- McRobbie, Angela. "Introduction to Postmodernism and Popular Culture." *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Meredith, Paul. "Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand." Te Oru Rangahau Maori Research and Development Conference. 1 July 1998. Lecture.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Ballantine, 1970. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*: 61. Print.
- Moi, Toril. "Feminist, Female, Feminine." *The Feminist Reader*. London, (1986). 117-132. Print.
- Moi, Toril. "'I am Not a Woman Writer': About Women, Literature and Feminist Theory Today." *Feminist Theory* (2008): 259-71. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986. Print.
- Roy, Srila. *New South Asian Feminisms Paradoxes and Possibilities*. London: Zed, 2012. Print.
- Rutherford, Jonathan. "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 207-221. Print.
- Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows*. New York: Picador, 2009. Print.
- Sultana, Abeda. "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis." *The Arts*

*Faculty Journal* July 2010-June 2011. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938. Print.