

Countering Western Feminism: A Pakistani Feminist Perspective in Shandana Minhas' *Tunnel Vision* and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin*

Abdul Wahab^{1*}, Dr.Waheed Ahmad Khan², Dr.Imran Ali³

¹PhD scholar at National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Pakistan

²Head of the Department of English, University of Haripur, Pakistan

³Assistant professor, University of Haripur, Pakistan.

*Corresponding author email address: abdul.wahab@numl.edu.pk, abdulwahabchd10@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Shandana Minhas' Tunnel Vision and Uzma Aslam Khan's Thinner than Skin are rich literary texts which negotiate the tension between Western feminist discourses and third world women. Western feminism deems itself as universal which claims that it encompasses the ordeals and the voices of all the women in the world. It takes women as homogenous category regardless of their race, color, nationality and religion. It assumes third world women as the victim of male dominance, dependent upon men, uncivilized and un-cultured, and moreover lacking in education and awareness regarding their due rights. Many feminists in the West see Pakistani females still fighting for basic human rights within an oppressive, religious, and male-dominated culture. However, Pakistani female Anglophone fiction writers like Shandana Minhas and Uzma Aslam Khan through their fictitious female characters challenge the hegemonic view of homogeneity and universality of Western feminism. They give an intellectual response to the misrepresentation of Third World women by creating female characters who are free individuals and capable of acting according to their own choice by challenging the traditional patriarchal norms of suppression and male domination. They possess human agency and their own subjectivity. Therefore, Pakistani female writers try to create autonomous female subjects. The study is qualitative in nature and relies on the interpretive analysis of the texts. It uses Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse (1984) as a theoretical framework. The study is important because it shows that western feminism is hegemonic and tries to colonize Third World through scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Western feminism, Third World feminism, ,women agency, subjectivity, colonization

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a movement which speaks for women rights across the globe. It, in case of radical feminism, aims to undo the hegemonic patriarchy. Feminists believe that men have marginalized and objectified women in the society. They have constructed a universal system and structure of oppression which feminists label as patriarchy. Every other system like family, religion, law, language and every social institution support this oppressive patriarchy. As patriarchy is universal and perpetual, therefore, in order to liberate women from the shackles of patriarchy, women need a movement which speaks for them and renders them a platform from where they could resist. This movement is called feminism. It enables women to act collectively towards a unified goal and to make a movement from a position of being to a position of doing, and to make a trajectory from an ontological position to an epistemological agency. Although there are many differences amongst feminists, but their objective is the same: the emancipation of women from the oppressive patriarchy. The history of feminism is often described in three waves. The concept of the wave originated with Irish activist, Frances Power Cobber, in 1884 who shared the movements which "resemble the tides of the ocean, where each wave obeys one more uniform impetus, and carries the waters onward and upward along the shore"(Hewitt, 2010, p. 2). However, to view feminism through the metaphor of wave is reductionist and monolithic as it ignores multiplicities, complexities and diversities existing within feminism as a movement and within women across the globe. Moreover, it also ignores women who have exhibited bravery throughout the history as it forms two homogenous groups where men are the subjects who perpetrate violence whereas women are the objects who defend themselves. In the same way, it reduces third world women into a single "constituted group, one which has been labeled as 'powerless,' 'exploited,' 'sexually harassed' etc." (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an Indian feminist scholar, in her essay, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse (1984)* argues that Western feminism has reduced all women of the color (Third World Women) into a single collective and monolithic other—universally oppressed—while overlooking their complexities, diversities, and multiplicities. It assumes women "... as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or social location..." (Mohantay, 1984, p.337). Western feminism represents Third World women as victim, powerless, and oppressive group, "what binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression" (Mohantay, 1984, p. 337). It shows that they are universally dependent upon men. On the other hand, it portrays White Women as educated, free, self-asserting, "secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives" (Mohantay, 1984, p. 353). Hence,



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Western feminism creates an image of other with its all negative connotations: docile, submissive, sexually constrained, and confined by tradition and gender. The woman of color is domesticated, uneducated, and victimized. She is an exotic other and therefore needs to be saved by White Women. Hence, a binary opposition of “us” vs. “them” is created where “us” is everything while “them” is not. “Us” is positive while “them” is negative. Mohanty (1984) challenges this binary opposition and contends that this is a Eurocentric view and is not helpful for women across the globe. She rejects the claim of the universality of Western feminist scholarship and terms it as the “global hegemony of the Western scholarship” (Mohantay, 1984, p. 336) and an act of colonization because colonization “implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression –often violent –of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (Mohantay, 1984, p. 333). Mohanty (1984) argues that Western feminism is based on a false assumption. It assumes that third world women are the “victims of male violence”, “victims of the economic development process”, and “victims of the Islamic code” (p. 338).

Pakistani female Anglophone writers write back to the center, and respond from the periphery. They, through their novels, challenge the universality of Western feminism. They try to dismantle the false image—inferior, victimized, and oppressed—of the women of the color created in Western feminist discourses. They not only challenge white women’s assumptions but also the patriarchal domination embedded in Pakistani culture. They create new feminine ideals, new realities and establish their own distinguished voices. Shandana Minhas, Shaila Abdullah, and Kamila Shamsie are few such Pakistani novelists who deal with feminine identities, their lives, interests and desires. Their discourses are female centric where women are represented as heroines and men are often portrayed as weak, timid, and having no influence upon their women. The discourses of their literary pieces do not represent male centric approach to world rather they are full of female experiences and female point of views.

MINHAS’ CONCEPT OF THIRD WORLD WOMEN AND THEIR MARGINALIZATION

Shandana Minhas is a Pakistani-American prolific author who has authored amazing novels. Her novel *Tunnel Vision* (2007) has been applauded both for her bold depiction of women in Pakistan with a special kind of autonomy within the stigmatized male dominated society and culture. Through her mouthpiece character, Ayesha, she articulates her inner thoughts. Her character is not a docile, submissive, and domesticated woman but is defiant and assertive who subverts the patriarchal norms of society and the ways in which women are deprived of their agency, individuality and subjectivity. She assaults the institution of marriage which is a dominant patriarchal institution, and desecrates it and renders it as a methodological pretension on the part of men to subjugate women and deprive them of their voice and autonomous self-identity. She does not consider marriage as a financial and emotional security; for her it means “being diminished” (Minhas, 2007, p. 141). Mohanty (1984) is of the view that Western feminism assumes third world women as “victims of male violence” (p. 338), and as “sexually oppressed” (p. 339). But this assumption has been proved as baseless by Ayesha who belongs to a third world country. She seems to be the perfect disciple of Simon de Beauvoir who in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) remarks about marriage wherein women have always been treated like payment. The woman in a marriage is a part of payment to which two groups mutually give their consent. She further says about the woman’s husband that “he is the subject; he is the absolute—she is the other” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 3). Minhas’ Ayesha shares the views of Beauvoir because she looks at husband as a master and wife as an object or slave who cannot do anything independently. For her, husband means an owner; she does not want to be owned like an object by anybody. She strongly advocates individualism, and for her, marriage means “being diminished” (Minhas, 2007, p. 141). Western feminism considers third world women as victim of their familial system where they adopt the role of a wife, sister, or a mother. Hence they “constitute a homogenous oppressed group” unable to “change at all” (Mohantay, 1984, p. 342). This homogenous group carries patriarchy and resides “outside history” (Mohantay, 1984, p.342).

Objectification of women is a common practice which is promoted through various institutions and belief system. Arranged marriage seems to be one such practice which promotes objectification in which a female body goes through surveillance. In the novel *Tunnel Vision* (2007), Omer, a lover of Ayesha, asks her to meet his mother in order to choose her for the marriage. But Ayesha strictly rejects this notion and abhors the idea that her beauty or objectifying of her body is an erroneous parameter for marriage, because she believes that marriage should be decided on the basis of equality between two persons. Each person respects humanity in others “... Humanity must never be treated merely as a means...” (Kant, 1963, p. 209). Ayesha loathes Omer’s perception of objectifying her body (Minhas, 2007, p. 288) as objectification mainly focuses on the treatment of a person as ... “as an object, something for use” (Herman, 1993, p. 57). Hence, Ayesha does not reckon beauty or attraction as a benchmark or requirement for a successful marriage. Therefore, she scolds him and finishes her relationship with him. Mohanty (1984) argues that Western feminism reduces third world women to “an object status” (p. 338), and as objects “who defend themselves” (p. 339). However, Ayesha is not an object but has her own agency and the power to act as per her own will.

Ayesha’s brother, Adil, also attempts to objectify her when she dreams, in the comma (Ayesha had an accident and was in comma), that he has advertised for her marriage partner in a newspaper: “Tall, Fair, MBA, Domesticated” (Minhas, 2007, p. 191). But she annuls the attempt by rejecting such notions of her brother. It shows that for social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to beautify their bodies and appearance and to make them conform to the ... so-called ‘norms of feminine appearance’ (Saul, 2003, p. 144). But she is a self-asserting woman and instantly remarks that she was not

domesticated by anyone. In the novel *Tunnel Vision* (2007), Adil tells her that her birth was an accident and their parents were not happy with her birth. Ayesha's father also declares that before the birth of his son, his family was incomplete; therefore, Ayesha questions that why a family is incomplete without a son. She believes that men folk denigrate women's copying skills; mock their decision making; jibe at their emotional frailty, but when a crisis inflicts them, they just fall apart. So, she strongly believes that she is not to be domesticated by any man (Minhas, 2007, p. 191). Therefore, she is consciously eager to disturb the status quo of patriarchy and to counter domestication and objectification of a woman in her life.

Mohanty (1984) contends that western feminism produces an image of an "average third world woman" (p. 337) whose life is based on her "feminine gender" (p. 337). Ayesha's class fellows in the MBA tell her that gender in corporate culture will not allow her to succeed as it is both her harsh enemy as well as a good friend at the work place. Because of gender issues, they could be mistreated, objectified or harassed. She was objectified by her boss during her process of taking leave but Ayesha does not want to be treated differently on the bases of biological differences. She remarks after her application is accepted: "But what a pity, trifling victory of biology over equality (Minhas, 2007, p. 34). The social meaning of sex (gender) is created by sexual objectification of women, whereby women are viewed and treated as objects for satisfying men's desires. Ruskin's queen, Patmore's angle and Rousseau's Sophie type women are required in the culture where Ayesha is thrown to live her life. But she disregards all such prescriptions and subscribes to Nietzsche's will to power to celebrate her being as autonomous rather than relying on extra being. Khairuddin, a typical capitalist patriarch, believes that a wife should follow the dictates of her husband without questioning; hence, he believes that women should be directed and used as instruments. Martha Nussbaum (1995) argues that women are used as instruments or tools for the objectifier's purposes (p. 257). Mohanty (1984) opines that Third World women are "powerless", "exploited", and "sexually harassed" (p. 338). But Ayesha bluntly counters such a representation of women. She strongly opposes the patriarchal views and flirtation of her boss. Moreover, she also questions the special treatment given to women in public places. She believes that women should be treated equally, not distinctly. Hence, assumption of Western feminism that third world women are objects, exploited and sexually harassed is groundless in the case of Ayesha.

Mohanty (1984) says that western women represent third world women as "politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism" (p.338). They assume that western women should educate third world women. But in the novel, Ayesha, the protagonist, is well aware of the gender issues in Pakistani society where women are treated in a special way on the basis of their gender identity. She resists that biased treatment and tries to stand out as a voice for women who are objectified and suppressed. Similarly she is super assertive about female bodies and hates the dominant sexual features in females. Because she believes that owing to dominant sexual features, a woman is then reduced to a sexual object. Rae Langton (2000) says that reduction to body and appearance implies that a woman is treated primarily in terms of physical organs and her looks (p. 228). Bartky (1990) also argues that a woman's body is an anonymous "patriarchal other" (p. 73). According to Bartky (1990), there are practices that women must conform to the body ideal of their time (p. 65). But Ayesha does not conform to such ornamental beauty to grab a life partner. For her, such ornamental and superficial standards of acceptability have no value; she believes in equality of opportunity, and autonomy of women, free from the objectification or discrimination of men.

Similarly, Ayesha thinks that the buildings of Karachi and the minarets are phallic symbols which are preserved as public monument. She says: "If I did pray after all, I was going to pray for an end to this worship of trivial male ideals" (Minhas, 2007, 105). Hence, Karachi and its building become for her a symbol of toxic patriarchy which has confined women's movement, freedom, and life. She says that women can excel if they are allowed, but gender does not allow them. MacKinnon (1987) also believes that we live in a world of gender inequality, where gender is socially constructed, whereas sex is biologically defined. Within our patriarchal societies, men and women have clearly defined roles: women are objectified, whereas men are their objectifiers (p. 32). Bartky (1990) is of the view that a feminine body's gestures, postures, and movements are controlled and restricted in a patriarchal society and women try to take up very little space as opposed to men. Women's movements are also restrained by their uncomfortable clothes and shoes (p. 68). But Ayesha questions her mother's view of differences of men and women in dresses. Her mother alludes to God's injunctions in determining differences in men and women dresses. But Ayesha replies ironically and humorously that God says: "Oye men wear pants and oye women don't wear pants!" (Minhas, 2007, p. 354). It shows that Ayesha rebels against the stereotyped and traditionally imposed dresses of men and women. Fulfilling the wish of Virginia Wolf, Ayesha is also represented as keeping her private room and is not ready to share it with people (Minhas, 2007, p. 358). She does not allow anyone to transgress her privacy; therefore, it shows that she believes in maintaining her space in the patriarchal society. It also shows that nobody can interfere in her privacy or restrict her movement in the society. Hence, it is proven that third world women are immature is a baseless argument of the western white feminism exhibiting its self-centered and Eurocentric attitude.

PAKISTANI WOMEN AND THEIR PROBLEMS

Uzma Aslam Khan is another prominent feminine voice rising from Pakistan. She answers back from margin to center. She has been credited with praiseworthy creative works presenting, documenting, commenting and critiquing the status of women in Pakistani society. She has written several novels like *The Geometry of God* (2008), *The Miraculous True History of*

Nomi Ali (2019), and *Thinner than Skin (2012)*. *Thinner than Skin (2012)* is also a tale, representing a female character and her journey through difficult times. She has set part of the novel in the patriarchal culture of Pakistan—Kaghan Valley—where it becomes difficult for women to participate actively outside their household. The only role which is expected from them is to keep care of the house, cooking and washing clothes. But Khan's *Thinner than Skin (2012)* presents Maryam as a woman who goes against her expected role in the male dominant society and moreover uses the same roles for her empowerment. However, Khan seems to be not that much radical like Minhas. Whereas Minhas' character blatantly condemns marital relationships, social differences between male and female on the basis of biological differences, and is assertive about female bodies, Khan's character does not explicitly reject everything. Rather she maintains her own identity without criticizing directly the male dominant society and the traditional gender role.

In Khan's novel *Thinner than Skin (2012)*, Maryam, a Gujjar nomad woman, lives in Kaghan Valley in winter and in the highlands during the summer. Her family lives in the shadow of two mountains above the valley: Malika Parbat and Nanga Parbat. Moreover, the minority religion is also considered as profanity for the new extremist intruders, Taliban, in the valley. Similarly, in Gujjar families, the practice of pagan rituals is abominable. The Muslim majority population of the valley, the newly intervened extremist Taliban, and her own family are against paganism, yet she practices her religion clandestinely in an inimical male dominant society. Martha Nussbaum (1995) says that in a patriarchal society, a woman is denied subjectivity which means that her experiences and feelings (if any) are not taken into account (p. 257). And it is really hard to stand against a society, where a woman faces troubles at different levels: firstly, surviving in a male-dominant society; secondly, maintaining and practicing strictly her alien religion. But Maryam practices her religious rituals in a patriarchal hostile Muslim society and tries to maintain her separate identity both as a pagan and an independent woman.

Mohantay (1984) contends that western feminism considers third world women as "victim of the Islamic code" (p. 338). Hence, it presents third world women as a "stable category of analysis" (p. 344), which is a "generalized notion of their subordination" (p. 344). In *Thinner than Skin (2012)*, Maryam practices her pagan rituals in an Islamic society. Similarly, the Islamic militants often successfully exploit the memory of martyr Syed Ahmad to recruit Gujjar boys who hate the Pakistani government's compliance with Chinese industry and American drones. But Maryam struggles to protect her young son from these "wrongly-turbaned men" (Khan, 2012, p. 253). She may support Taliban's opposition to the government's disruption of nomadic lifestyles, but she acknowledges the contradictory nature of their fundamentalism: "[t]he voice on the radio always said radio was sin" (Khan, 2012, p. 292). This is the time, when she is free from the cruel eyes of the society or gripping hold of the people who pursue her to accept their religion; the only time which does not move her is time (Khan, 2012, p. 78). She follows the caves where saint lived once. Fortunately, she finds solace there from all the oddities of life; her life gets peaceful and serene for quite some time. However, living in such society where religious and social rituals are always questioned, yet she accepts the challenges and confronts them as local follies. Therefore, according to Mohanty, western feminism has a reductionist attitude and ignores those women who have the power to resist and to live their life as per their will.

The way women have been treated in her valley gives a clear depiction of gender discrimination and injustice, where people are prejudiced and biased in favor of men folk. Hence, women cannot walk alongside the men, they are supposed to be behind the men who always lead them, and they should be at their back. Women are more restricted than men in the way they move, and they try to take up very little space as opposed to men. Women's movements are also restrained by their uncomfortable clothes and shoes (Bartky, 1990, p. 68). Men of the valley do not believe in equality, whereas Maryam is keenly interested in listening to the stories of North, where women have beautiful outfits and freedom from gender disparities. She shares the tales of Marian Zaman, a majestic woman in stories who used to roll away stones from the path, making it even and clear for the villagers. Her name is kept after Mariana Zamani, whose name and story always encourage Maryam that she is not an ordinary Gujjar woman, but a strong headed woman keeping her spirits high. Similarly, she also knows that a woman needs to be tougher and harder in this patriarchal society, therefore, she advises her daughter, Kiran, that she has to grow another skin to survive as women are thinner than skin. Hence, the assumption that third world women are "...politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western Feminism" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338) proves to be wrong here.

Mohanty (1984) argues that western feminism assumes that women in the third world have "needs and problems but few if any have choices or the freedom to act" (p. 344). Third world women are portrayed as universally dependent upon men. However, the case of Maryam is quite different here. She has her own choices. She is a good mother and keeps care of her kids. She enjoys being a mother. Motherhood grants her freedom and ability to act freely. She sells butter and milk and runs her household. Her husband has no role in her life. She reminds us of Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi short story, Breast Giver, who gives milk to children of other people when her husband got disabled. Jashoda adopts motherhood as a profession which grants her financial and social independency. About her Spivak remarks "Jashoda's sale of her maternal body to the household of a wealthy Brahmin family to support her own family effectively reverses this traditional sexual division of labor between men and women" (Morton, 2002, p. 126)

Thinner then Skin (2012) is a dynamic example of strong Pakistani women; the moving moment that gives the novel its title aptly occurs in Maryam's narrative when she teaches her daughter, Kiran, to disembowel a goat. Her daughter asks if

her own skin is as thin as that of a goat, and Maryam replies that it is thinner: "If a goat can be shred so easily, so could a woman" (Khan, 2012, p. 124). Maryam tells her daughter that she must grow a second skin to protect the thin one, but the second skin must remain hidden in order to work. Men have the belief that women are in fact submissive and object-like when it comes to women's objectification; the world conforms to men's minds. Maryam compares women to an innocent goat who will suffer in the patriarchal society, but she teaches her daughter that she has to confront the sufferings in the male dominant society and will never succumb to them.

Thus it can be said that Uzma Aslam Khan endeavors to create strong female characters that are free from the societal gender role assigned to them. They are against the toxic patriarchy and try to challenge every patriarchal notion and institution. Khan also challenges the false image created by the Western feminism about non-white women as docile, submissive, meek and victimized.

CONCLUSION

Hence, the above analysis exhibits that Pakistani female novelists challenge the universality and misrepresentation of the women of the color in Western feminist discourses. They show to the world that oppression of the women is not universal; they are not homogenous in their sufferings. Rather there are women like Ayesha who boldly challenge patriarchy and Maryam who maintains her individuality in a place like Kaghan Valley. Thus Pakistani female Anglophone fiction writers set landscape for Pakistani women to grow and speak for themselves. Therefore, they create female characters that are not ready to internalize patriarchal norms. They are free individuals having their own identity and self-determining agency. They make trajectory from a position of being to a position of doing. Both the women make a journey from a position of being to a state of doing. Ayesha goes through various suffering in the patriarchal society but she has the power of resistance and the capability to question patriarchal norms. Similarly, Maryam is also independent and controls her own life. She maintains her own identity in the dominant patriarchal Pakistani culture. Thus, both the authors through their discursive efforts counter the universally upheld view that if western feminist do not come to the assistance of the women of color, they would not be able to struggle for their rights or get independence from male dominancy. The texts convey a message of self-reliance of non-white woman laying bare the potential not only to speak for them but also to do for them. In this regard, Shandana Minhas' *Tunnel Vision* (2007) and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin* (2012) are great contribution to the feminist discourse of the woman of color and more specifically, Pakistani feminist discourse. This encourages Pakistani women to come up and speak for themselves and gain their due rights in due course of time.

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It is declared that all authors don't have any conflict of interest.

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