

Questioning the Monolithic Representation of Veiled Women: A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis

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Abstract

The article attempts to reflect and question the fixed and static representation of the practice of veiling in a personal narrative of an Afghan woman, entitled *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom*, published in 2002 in the backdrop of Taliban's rule with their proverbial misogyny and ruthlessness. Contextualized within the broader framework of postcolonial feminism, our argument attempts to locate a range of theoretical debates and concerns about veiling, both as a cultural practice and identity-marker, which is linked, directly or indirectly, with the position of Muslim women in their specific socio-political contexts. A critical reading of the contents of text has demonstrated that the discursive representations of veiling and veiled woman in the delimited text is not free from western condescension as it tends to relegate and marginalize Muslim women without appreciating their subjective and collective identity. Rather in representing Afghan woman's life and agency in the backdrop of war and Talibanization, the narrative voice seems to flatten the myriad experiences of Afghan women by failing to offer a more nuanced and context-specific explanation of veiling vis-à-vis Afghan culture. The article concludes by emphasizing the need to create a more tolerant and inclusive feminist discourse that is both sensitive and responsive to the lived experiences and socio-historical realities of Afghan women in particular and Muslim women in general in their distinct cultural context.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Feminism, Veiling, Representation, Inclusive Discourse, Western Condescension*

Introduction

Reading the personal account of an Afghan girl, belonging to a prototypically patriarchal culture and a country ravaged by war, foreign invasion and internal conflicts by various warlords for more than three decades is itself a difficult choice, especially when such selection of reading is situated in the complex and multilayered context of postcolonial theory. Being at once complex and thickly theoretical, such reading has to consider the myriad ways in which patriarchy, colonization and nationalism seem to impinge on the lives of their subjects, especially women. Such reading becomes further complicated when we see that even colonization and imperialism seem not to operate identically on both genders, calling for the need to understand how the subjective identity of both men and women is shaped in the

backdrop of specific historical and cultural realities. In this way, placing the question of gender at the intersection of class, colonialism and ethnicity demonstrates how and why the nationalist or colonialist elite seems to elide or override the question of gender in their representation? On a related note, postcolonial thinkers have not conceded to a totalizing and singular category of the once-colonized without a due regard for what they called the very notion of “double colonization” where “women were subject both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p.103).

Delimitation and brief summary of the text

In the following lines, we have attempted to do a critical reading of a memoir/life story by an Afghan woman Zoya which appeared as *Zoya's Story* in 2002 from a Britain-based Publishing House. The book has a subtitle *An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* which gives this personal story a rather added significance as it offers itself to be documenting/representing the experiences of Afghan women in general during the times of Russian invasion and Taliban rule. This impression is further qualified as the book is dedicated to the "women of Afghanistan" who are the "victims of inhuman suffering inflicted by fundamentalism" especially the Taliban with their ruthless imposition of religion/shariah on people (Zoya, 2002, Dedication).

The twenty-three years old girl, Zoya witnesses the bloodshed, massacre and resultant chaos in post 1990s Afghanistan and endures Muslim Fundamentalists' ruthless murder of her parents. The story is an elegiac commemoration of her own tragedy that resulted in the loss of her freedom and parents. Her forced exile and stay in Pakistan lead her to the joining of Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the only forum to challenge the undemocratic reign of Taliban. In these desperate circumstances, she decides to steer her own destiny in the face of inevitable dangers lingering over her life. Reflecting on the early childhood days during the Russian invasion in Afghanistan and the Mujahideen's resistance against it, Zoya juxtaposes the pre-Taliban era, when Afghan women would come out wearing miniskirts in the streets of Kabul with post-Taliban era when bright colors and laughter were forbidden for them. In these circumstances, Zoya pens her struggle against the religious extremism of Taliban by viewing it as the most formidable threat to the freedom and emancipation of Afghan women. As a sign of her difference from the misanthropy and misogyny of Afghan tribal culture, Zoya keeps a little bottle of perfume as her discreet and “small gesture of rebellion” (p.1) and dares to “speak of justice and democracy” in the midst of religious extremism where the “only law was that of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (p.242).¹

A word about genre and narrative voice

Before analyzing the actual content of the text with the critical lens of Postcolonial feminism, it is pertinent to explain, briefly, the specific genre that Zoya has chosen to write in, in order to represent her existential struggle against tyranny and oppression. The book has been written in the fashion of a memoir, as it opens with

Zoya's present struggle during Taliban regime and then moves retrospectively in her childhood, reminiscing her memories of a home and parents that she has lost due to their activism against the forces of fundamentalism in Afghanistan. Though the book is written as a memoir describing the horrific memories/experiences of her life, yet, in order to give it a quasi-real significance, "certain names, locations and other details" were changed, hence strengthening the impression that the book is about the real-life story of an Afghan girl who in her person is becoming the mouthpiece of the whole womenfolk of Afghanistan. Moreover, Zoya's preference to write her personal story in English embodies the perennial anxiety of many postcolonial writers over the choice of their language and the accompanying ambivalence to maintain the distinction between "autobiographical and novelistic formats" (Clements p. 44).

Thus Zoya, as the actor and narrator of the story shares with her readers what she calls in the subtitle of the book as an "Afghan woman's struggle for freedom". The first question emerging out of this inscription takes readers to deconstruct the complex question –freedom from what or in other words what is that Zoya is seeking freedom from? Adding to their sense of curiosity is the photograph shown in the title of the book, of a woman (probably Zoya herself) clad in a blue polyester Burqa – a head-to-toe covering ostensibly became popular during Taliban's occupation in Afghanistan.

Another curious feature of the book cover is that it carries the names of two western journalists – John Follian and Rita Christofari (2002) who have worked as co-authors in documenting the story of Zoya's struggle. Despite that Zoya has had enough command on English language, she chooses to co-author the narrative with these journalists, hence opening up another layer of a rather complex debate regarding the role of inscription or more correctly speaking inscribers in writing the personal account of her struggle.

That Zoya is speaking in the first person 'I', but in this apparently singular subjectivity is embedded the other two individuals from a different (rather opposite) spatio-cultural context, raises some troubling questions about the legitimacy of her voice as a narrator. Thus, in the presence of two foreign journalists who in Said's suggestive expression, seem to be "performing" more than "a mechanical reporting chore", the narrative of Zoya is equally problematic in terms of the "ideological traps" and "competing...intellectual values" coming in the way of the narrator and the co-narrators. (1984, p.46). Likewise, the very idea of inscription becomes quite problematic as it no more remains an innocent recording of facts and events, but a highly political activity regarding "who is talking, with what perspective and by whose standards (Schwandt, 1997, p.71). With such authorial intervention, Zoya's voice – as a teller of her life-story is juxtaposed with that of her co-authors, where parallel to her self-posturing of a courageous Afghan woman fighting against oppressive tribalism and misogyny, her voice seems to appease, rather unwittingly, many prejudices and biases of her western co-authors and readers.

On the other hand, the presence of two western voices seems to contaminate

the erstwhile singularity or purity of Zoya's narrative/voice, implicitly suggestive of the colonial trope of Muslim women saved by the western men (and women) as their messiah. Likewise, the image of a burqa-clad woman on the cover of the book runs counter to an opposite image of some Afghan women "sans burqa" (p.71) which in view of Gallagher became one of the most recurring motifs in western, particularly American mass-media during and after Taliban regime.

Feminism and postcolonialism at the crossroads

The relevant theoretical debates of postcolonial feminism inform the deconstruction of the text selected for this study. Our reading is conscious of the multiple interpretive angles which are born out of the text and which resist a static or singular perspective on different aspects of Zoys' personal struggle as well as the collective history of Afghan women in general. Since a deconstructionist reading aims at displacing the established meanings of the text by replacing and reversing it with a different meaning or meanings, it is likely to be a restructuring of text into a chain of significations which are infinite – an endless play of language games. In this way for Derrida, deconstruction offers the possibility of every interpretation to be creative and important by asking questions and demonstrates that what a text interprets is noticeably different from what a text tells.

As stated before, a range of theoretical debates within postcolonial feminism has been skeptical about the strong feminist belief, quite popular in the second wave of feminism, in global sisterhood by arguing the inevitable differences found in the cultural and historical realities of third-world women on account of their experience of colonization and more subtle forms of neo-colonialism (Ahmad, 1992; Lazreg, 1988; Mohanty, 2003 & Spivak, 1988). However, among these names, Mohanty very convincingly argues that in emphasizing a sisterly solidarity between women of different cultures and societies, the feminist scholarship tends to elide the differences which are found within the question of woman all around the world. She also accentuates the need to be more critical and self-reflexive when it comes to the analysis of third-world women and the specific socio-cultural context they belong to. In this way, Mohanty questions the western feminist project that underwrites third-world women as a monolithic group by limiting them into the global structure of patriarchy "universally and cross-culturally" (2003, Introduction, p.21). On the other hand, she considers "diversity and difference...as central values...to be acknowledged and respected [than to be] erased in the building of alliances", and refers to Jodi Dean's notion of "reflective solidarity" particularly useful for its willingness "to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal, "rather than as an "us vs. them" category (p.7).

However, despite her advocacy for such inclusive feminist activism, Mohanty acknowledges that within the broader realm of feminist politics (especially western), speaking for the marginalized or the silenced sometimes entails a peculiar brand of intransigent feminism which, either romanticizes or homogenizes the so-called third-world women in their eternal subalternity. Hence these women are portrayed as "politically immature" and in need "to be versed and schooled in the

ethos of Western feminism” (Mohanty, p.24). Far from presenting them as subject to/of their material and cultural histories and without “uncovering the material and ideological specificities” (p.24) behind their assumed or real powerlessness, such representations tend to reproduce and reinforce what Spivak has referred as the “axioms of imperialism” (1985, p.243). By the same logic, Mohanty also criticizes the “ethnocentric universalism” of western feminists by arguing that they “alone become the true “subjects” of this counter-history”, whereas “Third World women” are never shown rising “above the debilitating generality of their “object” status” (2003, p.39).

In line with Mohanty’s theorization about the peculiar experiences of third-world women, the feminist debates within third-world have emphasized the necessity to understand women’s question in the background of colonization. Such inquiry, undoubtedly, has teased out wider implications for the colonizers’ self-image which is used as a “mirror or foil through which colonial ways of seeing and gendering could become norm” (Al-Saji, 2010, p.884). However, in an attempt to subvert and appropriate the epistemological and ideological claims of a west-centric discourse, both feminism and postcolonialism have cross-fertilized each other. They have argued how colonization had silenced the indigenous voices of ex-colonial societies, which, in turn, has led to many postcolonial authors to “undermine and delegitimize the centrality of West” (Newman, 1992, p.24), hence pointing to the mutually entailing relationship between feminism and postcolonialism.

This subtle link is further qualified and made clear in the forthcoming analysis which has focused on a critical analysis of the personal life-story of Zoya, who, as an Afghan girl has been subject to the twin exploitation from foreign invasion and patriarchal oppression simultaneously. Her story, when gleaned from this dual lens of postcolonial feminism has highlighted the multilayered historical and cultural dimensions of Afghan women’s struggle against the external and internal forces of oppression and misogyny. This becomes more evident as the book is dedicated to the “women of Afghanistan” who are the “victims of inhuman suffering inflicted by fundamentalism” (in that case its religious brand in particular).

Discursive Representation of the Practice of Veiling

Out of many concerns that Zoya’s story invokes regarding postcolonial feminism, we will particularly focus on the discursive representation of the practice of veiling and its relationship with the identity and agency of Afghan women (both veiled and unveiled) in the backdrop of Taliban’s rule with its infamous misogyny and extremism. The very idea of veiled Muslim women, albeit its enduring presence in the discursive representation of Muslim culture, has been selected on account of its multiple, even contradictory significations as argued by many notable Muslim feminists and postcolonial theorists (Fanon,1965; Hoodfar,1992 & Grace, 2004). Given that veiling has a direct link with the construction of Muslim women’s subjectivity, Zoya’s narrative is particularly focused on her resentment for and resistance against the religious extremism of Taliban in the discursive trope of a bearded, weapon-carrier, ignorant mullah with his militancy and misogyny despite that such misogynist outlook is equally present/prevalent among the so-called

nationalist or tribal elite.² In this way, Zoya's account becomes problematic as it tends to present a reductive, at times sweeping portrayal of veiling and veiled women with its denial to acknowledge the symbolic and cultural nuances of this practice. At many points in her narration, she seems to subscribe to a feminist view which is binaristic as she exhibits her incapacity to consider the complex historical and cultural trajectories shaping and constituting the subjectivity of Afghan women in the backdrop of war, internal conflicts and most of all patriarchy and tribalism. This can be seen very vividly when we see that her voice ignores how the foreign powers (including Russian and America) working in alliance with local "tribal and royal leaders" were as indifferent to the question of women as those of their religious counterparts (Gallagher, p.75). That this connivance between secular and religious groups in unison with the warring foreign powers imply those hegemonic structures which continue to perpetuate violence and subjugation as the destiny of Afghan women.

What further problematizes Zoya's narrative is that it presents the practice of veiling with a totalizing gaze of western feminists who view it as a conspicuous sign of Muslim women's oppression. By way of implication, she herself is exempt from this totalizing view of women's abject position by virtue of being the daughter of an enlightened, liberal and secular parents who were the radical non-conformist in the heteronormative Afghan culture plagued with patriarchy and tribal primitivism. Thus, Zoya and her parents' outright rejection of religious fanaticism position them in a stark binary to the rest of Afghan people with their conservative outlook.

Right from the beginning of her story, she repeatedly tells her readers about the non-conformist bearing of her parents including their decision to marry without having lavish and extravagant formalities customary in Afghan culture so much so that for many of their relatives, "the(ir) wedding was like a funeral" (2002, pp.15-16). Her father particularly defied the misogynist practices/norms quite common in his culture, be it his rejection of "having more than one wife", or his response on Zoya's birth as a baby girl, or his liberal outlook towards his wife's career and activism as he allowed her to continue her education in a secular university (pp.15-17). Besides these personal choices, her parents showed absolute rejection of religious fanaticism, which was taking stronger roots in Afghanistan with hordes of mullah and Mujahideen fighting against Russian invasion. However, owing to their secular and nationalist bearing, her parents were involved in activism and resistance against Russians and religious fundamentalists simultaneously by becoming part of a nationalist organization – The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

Born and raised in a politically-sensitive circumstances, Zoya became conscious of her parents' activism with a host of other men and women and eventually realized their vulnerability. The time when she was asked by her mother to hide some papers published by RAWA in order to avoid the possible scrutiny and suspicion of both Russians and religious fundamentalists (p.35), did she experience her dim sense of fear regarding her mother's activism turning into vivid horror

(pp.44-45). However, it is through her parents that she started to see both Russians and Mujahidin, albeit with their mutual antagonism, as common and shared enemy of all that she and her modern educated parents with their activism stood for. Tracing back the activism of her parents, Zoya presents her mother to be more dynamic and active than her father. On the other hand, contrary to the proto-masculine and chauvinist Afghan men, who expect their women to drop everything and stay at home after marriage, her father supported her mother and “made no such condition” (p.16). In her repeated rejection of the patriarchal customs of her culture, Zoya’s narrative creates an underlying binary between the liberal, secular and modern bearing of her parents and the conservative, patriarchal and religiously-extremist outlook of many Afghans.³

It is precisely at this point that many significant themes of feminism and postcolonialism intersect with Zoya’s life/story, both as an Afghan woman and as a colonized subject. However, the most frequent and unambiguous expression of her feminist ideals as they were shaped under the influence of western ideal of emancipation comes in her reference to the practice of veiling. In a manner which evidences her absolute disdain for the practice of veiling, she calls it “horrid burqa” (2002, p.35), “the cheap blue polyester” (p.1), “the sweat-drenched fabric” (p.5) which is a kind of “mesh” blocking and “obscuring [her] vision” (p.167). Far from rejecting the retrograde version of womanhood and religious law by the Taliban, veiling, in her account, seems to signify “universally and almost exclusively the oppression of women...metonymically stand[ing]...not only for Islam but for the putative gender oppression of that religion” (Al-Saji, 2010, p.880). With a series of negative connotations, it becomes synecdochical for Islam’s misogyny as it objectifies women in their eternal oppression. Likewise, the narrative’s inflated expression of burqa-clad women with their degraded position tends to present it as the only problem of Afghan women doubly victimized by patriarchy and foreign invasion. Commenting on the forced imposition of burqa by Taliban regime, she ironically calls it the “only passport...demanded of a woman” (2002, p.3) implying the fundamentalists’ belief that women “should hide their identities as women, to make them feel so ashamed of their sex that they were afraid to show one inch of their bodies” (p.5). We want to argue that veil, in Zoya’s narration, becomes a “focal point in the othering of Islam” when it is attributed to the oppressive gender relations in Muslim culture, with an implicit denouncing of “Muslim man” as “medieval and barbaric” with a penchant to enslave women in the confines of family and home (Al-Saji, 2010, p.887). On the other hand, her radically secular outlook disenables her to consider any alternative interpretation to the practice of veiling, hence does not qualify her argument to be a variant of Muslim feminists who view veiling as a cultural marker of Muslim women’s collective identity. We want to emphasize this interpretive angle as the narrative describes the practice of veiling in a manner which is sweeping and judgmental and is based on a blanket rejection of it even if it is adopted by women consciously and purposely.

A critical reading of the narrative unmask this particular outlook of Zoya with regards to the practice of burqa and burqa-clad women. As an important leitmotif of the story, this representation of veiling connects the personal tale of Zoya

with the broader debates of women's position and status in Afghan culture and elsewhere in Muslim world. In one of her secret visits to Kabul, she was forced to buy a burqa – the type mandatory for women during Taliban regime and in that “small mountain of cheap blue polyester”, felt “short of air as if someone has turned off her supply of oxygen” (pp.1-2). She narrates how her ‘blood boiled’ when she was forcibly made to buy and wear something that she “loathed” most, to the extent that she even thought of “sett[ing] fire to the whole shop” which displayed them (p.141). She further ostracizes burqa and the burqa-wearing women by calling them “disgusting sleeping ghosts” (p.141). In all these instances, she lays bare her absolute rejection and disdain for the practice of veiling and even romanticizes the past when Afghan women used to enjoy absolute freedom and mobility under the secular regime by not wearing veil. In a manner which is judgmental does she represent the “strange” women who wear the veil “next to the *beautiful young* women of the city who walked happily arm in arm, wearing make-up and short skirts” (p.23, italics mine). Her words qualify our argument in the preceding lines about her subjective outlook which is fashioned increasingly under western ethos of women's empowerment as she seems to denounce the very practice of burqa per se than its forced imposition by the Taliban and says

I would stare at the burqas and try to imagine what *kinds of faces* were under them. I want to ask them why they were wearing it, but I never dared to... My parents had told me that only women from *far away villages* who could not read and write wore them. The *beggars* wore them, and so did *prostitutes* who did not want to be *recognized*. (p.23, italics mine)

Without investing much energy, one can see how her expression in above lines is contrived on a strictly Manichean binary between the women who wear veil and those who do not by relegating the later in the category of beggars, prostitutes and unlettered villagers, shy to be recognized as humans or women. On the other hand, her voice seems to belie the erstwhile tolerant or secular outlook that she ostensibly assumes as she sees little signs of agency among veiled women by considering veiling as “equivalent of *de-subjectification...*, a victimhood or voicelessness” of Muslim women” (Al-Saji, p.877, italics original).

In this way, Zoya epitomizes the totalizing western gaze with its denial to see or acknowledge the nuances of this practice in Muslim women and their myriad cultures. Not only this, but she does not view the complex question of women's emancipation beyond the narrow limits of appearance and outfit. This is made more manifest when she recalls the unveiled appearance of many Afghan women in 1959 whose act of publicly renouncing burqa was sufficient to prove their empowerment and emancipation from tyranny (p.23). Far from engaging herself with the multiple forms of exploitation that contribute to the subjugated position of Afghan women vis-à-vis patriarchy, wars and regressive tribal norms, Zoya's voice and manner is reductive and simplistic in representing veiling as the only cause of Afghan women's sufferings and struggle. By the same logic, she tends to treat veiled women as a signifier of gender oppression in the Islamic world in general, hence distancing herself from many Muslim feminists whose avowed secularism has not blinded them

to acknowledge the inherent ambivalence and diversity which is present in the practice of veiling in various Muslim cultures.⁴

For instance, Daphne Grace cautions against western feminists' blanket rejection of veiling by arguing that both veiling and unveiling can be liberating or oppressive, depending on the context. She further says that "while it is possible to argue that veiling is an indicator of class identity, gender inequality and/or opposition to the west, it is important to clarify *who* is speaking and by *which* standards they are measuring" (2004, p.10, italics mine). In a similar argument, Mabro (1991) highlights the diverse and varied context of veiling in different Muslim cultures by arguing against the exotic and enigmatic construction of veiling and harem in the imagination of western travelers in the Middle East. She argues how such representation is based on an essentialist image of Muslim women by showcasing absolute disregard for the specific socio-cultural norms in terms of the unsettling question of gender in Muslim cultures. This is most conspicuous in a west-centric discursive representation of Muslim women that hardly transcends the petty and narrow limits of outfits by downplaying the more complex and compelling concerns of their existence including their education, health and political freedom in their specific cultures.⁵

Such essentialist view of veiled Muslim women across different cultures has resulted in a rigid and singular version of veiling and all its derivatives including scarf, hijab and any other form of headgear. Hoodfar has challenged this view by arguing that to assume that veil equals "ignorance" and "oppression" has meant that young Muslim women have "to invest a considerable amount of energy in asserting themselves as thinking, rational, literate" human beings (1993, p.5). It also ignores the fact that as a lived experience with its own ambivalence and diversity, veiling has been continuously practiced by Muslim women to resist and challenge patriarchy, foreign oppression and other hegemonic forms in their specific contexts. "To deny this is also to deny Muslim women of their agency" (Hoodfar, p.5).

In case of Zoya's narrative, such outright denial of veiled Muslim women can be seen at the end where the narrator describes her experience of travelling to New York during the reign of Taliban. In the backdrop of an absolutely negative projection of Afghanistan in international media with a bunch of horrifying news and scandals about Taliban's inhumanity and misogyny, Zoya enacts the bizarre role of lifting her burqa before a western audience. Her performance on the poem of an American feminist Eve Ensler "*Under the Burqa*"⁶ is symptomatic of this reductive and essentialist view of veiled Muslim women when "slowly, very slowly, Oprah lifted the burqa off me and let it fall to the stage" (p.219), enabling her symbolically to rise above her debilitating subjectivity. The fact that she would have remained bereft of agency and choice, had she remained wrapped in that hideous garment locking a "live body in a coffin" (p.217). Hence, in the dramatic act of unveiling herself and lifting the burqa from her face, Zoya seems to reclaim her lost subjectivity and stamps and celebrates American cultural triumph over her cultural norms. Her act of unveiling is neither politically innocent nor plain as she "cheers on the American invasion of Afghanistan" as the sole guarantee of Afghan women's freedom

(Gallagher, p.75), hence succumbs to the pressure of what Al-Saji has called a “phallogocentric gaze [that] desires possession of women’s bodies and wants to see [it]” (2010, p.886). Moreover, it brings her body and agency under the direct surveillance of a western audience and their holy mission to liberate and emancipate all Muslim women in an attempt to unveil them – signifying what Fanon has called “the psychological phenomenon of conversion” (1965, p.167). With its dramatic maneuvering, this episode of unveiling in Zoya’s story “[normalizes] the availability of women’s bodies to the colonial gaze” by foregrounding western “perceptual schemata” that reflects a “negative mirror for the norms of womanhood and gender” in Muslim societies (Al-Saji, pp.885-886).

Not only this but her act of renouncing burqa becomes a major doxa that ostensibly emancipates Afghan women from their abject position with a convenient amnesia about Americans' aggression and violation of human rights in Afghanistan during and after the war. It also suggests the subtle political implications of this project of unveiling as evidenced in American First Lady Laura Bush’s address with her rather naïve justification of America “to keep bombing” Afghanistan in order to emancipate Afghan women from Taliban (Gallagher, p.80). As a corollary to this, this image of lifting burqa by an Afghan woman before a western audience relieves the later from the dual burden of seeing their role in the ruined and war-ravaged Afghanistan and also frees them from confronting their long-standing commitment to ensure Afghan women’s fundamental human rights. Hence an overly exaggerated focus on veiling as the sole signifier of Muslim women’s abject position tends to free the western conscience from the guilt of seeing their own role in making the lives of Afghan women more wretched and miserable. It also relieves them from the burden of solving the real and more pressing problems faced by women in Afghanistan and elsewhere in third-world, stricken by wars, violence, capitalism and class and which the so-called liberating slogan of western powers could not redeem even after they overthrew the Taliban rule.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to offer a more critical and situated reading of Muslim women in the context of veiling which can enable us to avoid such reductive generalization by looking into the broader picture of their struggle and sufferings in their material history. It also concludes that without being complicit with the bleak and shadowy image of veiled Muslim women in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the discursive representation on the subject needs to consider the complex historical, cultural and political trajectories which constitute the collective and individual life-stories of women. Likewise, in order to emphasize the principle of respecting and accepting differences as the cornerstone of feminist politics, feminism must come to terms with the cultural specificity and distinctiveness of various social norms and practices including the centuries-old practice of veiling and segregation in Muslim cultures. Likewise, by transcending the singular and monolithic portrayal of veiled woman from being “dangerous and immobilizing” to “recalcitrant and obfuscating” (Al-Saji, p.876), the postcolonial feminist discourse can become a potential site of

creating more space for the diverse and unique experiences of Muslim women, veiled or unveiled. This can, in turn, resist the dominant proclivity of mythologizing or demonizing Muslim women without judging them on some ideological a-priori of western feminism. (Robbins, 2000). Failing to concede this, the postcolonial feminism is likely to fall short of understanding the lived realities and material concerns of Muslim women. The increasing presence and participation of Muslim women (veiled or otherwise) in third-world feminist politics point to the possibility of a more critical and grounded appreciation of various cultural practices including veil. With such historically-specific and transpositional understanding of women's question in Muslim cultures, feminism can better come to terms with the real gains of an emancipatory and transformational politics and bring about a real attitudinal change in the individual and collective lives of women around the world.

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Notes

¹ Here the text almost replicates the Quranic version ('eye for eye, tooth for tooth') and makes a rather reductive reading of the divine concept of 'Qisas' with its stringent parameters of retribution in Sharia Law. Paradoxically, this view, in no way, is contrary to the spirit of justice and democracy that Zoya ostensibly stands for in her narration throughout.

² We want to highlight this aspect in particular because unlike the common perception that views Taliban as the most adverse enemy of women in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the reality on ground has shown that many warlords, including the Northern Alliance with their avowedly secular and nationalist outlook, are no less inhuman and misogynist in their treatment of women. This is evidenced in one report of Amnesty International which states that Northern Alliance has committed more sexual crimes against women including rape than the Taliban (Gallagher, p.81), which indicates that female violence and abuse have more to do with the tribal and patriarchal nature of heteronormative Afghan culture than religious extremism and orthodoxy.

³ Though it is not our major argument in this article however, Zoya's story is further extended into an elaborate representation of Islamic fundamentalists and expresses her heightened contempt for these "crazed-eyed, dirty-bearded and filthy-clothed" men called Taliban (p.2). As signs of Taliban's misogyny and inhumanity, her narration presents a series of spectacle from stoning-to-death, public hanging and amputation of men to the sexual abuse and harassment of women under Taliban

rule (p.144) which reinforces the negative image of Islamic fundamentalist in the mainstream discourse.

⁴ For some interesting aspects of this discussion see Fanon (1965); Grace (2004); Hoodfar (1993); Mabro (1991) and Aftab (2011) on the subject of veiled women.

⁵ The similar point is argued very convincingly by Nancy Gallagher in her discussion where she says that during her interaction with Afghan women, she discovered that majority of them “did not mind the “burqa” as much as the poverty and lack of security, schools and jobs” (p.81). The irony is that these more pressing problems which they faced, remained unattended and largely unfulfilled even after the end of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and restoration of so-called democratic regimes.

⁶ It is worth mentioning that Eve Ensler is known for another yet more controversial writing *The Vagina Monologues* – which, with some appropriation, was performed by a group of Pakistani feminists in a Lahore-based Theatre and reported in *Friday Times* in a manner which does not correspond to the social and moral norms of Pakistani culture. For details see Tarik Jan’s *Secular Threat to Pakistan’s Security* (2004, p.50).