

Individuality: “Third World Woman” in Nadia Anjum’s Poetry Collections

* *Qurat Ul Ain Khalil*
Saima Khan

ABSTRACT: *The following study traces the re-incarnation of female individuality through selected poems from Nadia Anjum’s poetry collections Disquietude and Woman.Woman@Pk. The aim is to present an alternate view of a third world woman’s identity and experiences by a female poet belonging to Pakistan. Through the analysis of Anjum’s poetry the reader becomes familiar with the multitude of aspects contributing to the formation of Pakistani woman’s identity. The objective of this research is to observe the diversity of experiences reflected upon in Anjum’s poetry in the light of Mohanty’s Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism to enable countering the stereotypes most associated with women from third world countries. The theoretical framework of third world feminism is supported by the post-colonial backdrop. The rationale behind this research is to pave way for the re-contextualization of Pakistani women hence, refuting their mainstream representation. Disquietude and Woman.Woman@Pk have enticed the interest of young readers as well as working women due to their honest and witty subject matter.*

Keywords: feminism; third world woman; liberation; re-contextualization; representation.

* quratulain.khalil@kinnaird.edu.pk

Introduction:

Representation emerged as an important and trending theme of South Asian literature. Rising trend amongst Pakistani writers to respond to the “Empire” restricted the literary canon from experiencing and promoting true self-expression. (Said 220) South Asian literature explored various dichotomies regarding the reality of East versus that which is assumed by West. The inclination towards decolonization of western narrative holds immense weightage for emerging writers from Pakistan. Appropriation allows decentralizing the widespread notions promoted by literature used “to create fixed, stereotyped ideas, especially in the English Language, due to its global reach.” (Hajiyeva 136) The following research aims to portray the broad spectrum of capabilities, experiences and knowledge of an observant female poet from Pakistan. Breaking the stereotypes created by the Occident of an immobile, unaware and suppressed woman from Pakistan.

Dr. Nadia Anjum is an associate professor and head of MPhil English Literature at Kinnaird College for Women University. In addition to this, she is the head of advanced research at Kinnaird as well. She is also the advisor for Najmuddin Dramatics Society which dates back to the 1950’s and is famous for putting together finest re-enactment of Shakespearean and Shavian plays. She was nominated for National Quaid-e-Azam merit scholarship going on to pursue a PGD in TEIL. Apart from this, she was awarded the Star Laureate Award-South Asia Publication 2008 in recognition of her achievements in the field of education.

Anjum co-authored, *Teaching Human Rights through English Language Education* 2005 which received the highest British Eltech Award. She is a Pakistani female poet, writing in English. Her poetry collections include *WOMAN.WOMAN@PK* (2016), *DISQUIETUDE* (2017) and *Fairy Dust* (2019). In Taufiq Rafat’s words, her “poetry emanates from the very land in which it is written. The cultural substratum that gives anchorage to its roots remains a variable source from which it gains nourishment and defines the self of the poet.” (qtd. in Hayat 2)

Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition discusses the dangers one's identity is exposed to, "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves." (Taylor 25) The objective of this research is to analyze the diversity of experiences and perspectives employed in Anjum's poetry collections in order to reveal an alternate view and experiences of a Pakistani woman.

Women from the third world countries most of the times have been portrayed as those who are repressed and/or distant from access to mobility, both physical and imaginative. The study of a woman's poetry from Pakistani community would go beyond breaking the stereotypes associated with Pakistani native women. Analysis of Anjum's poetry collections showcases emerging trend encouraging self-sufficiency and true self-expression for the upcoming writers. One of the key theorist, Mohanty Chandra Talpade's concept of de-categorizing third world woman and her monolith identity from the West-centric feminist discourse is integral for re-invention of South Asian identity. Interestingly, female members of the society from the subcontinent have been observed to vocalize poetically. It has been noted by a researcher that, "... poetry, is the breath of life in our society, women have been as much conversant with it as men, and from Mogul times... Empress Nur Jehan's maid, when she broke a mirror, went up to her mistress and announced the accident in a verse:

Be Qazai Aeena Cheeni Shikasth.

Accident of fate has shattered the Chinese mirror.

The Empress capped by saying:

Khub Shud Asbabai Khud Beeni Shikasth.

Good that the aid to vanity is shattered. (Ikramullah 717)

"Under Western Eyes" by Mohanty explores the homogenization of women that involves a colonial bias. (334) Labelling involves the extermination of all the individual experiences of women coming from diverse cultural, social and/or religious backgrounds.

Therefore, she defies the generic viewing of women from the third world countries. The myth pertaining to universal feminism is debunked as Mohanty goes on to explain, "...there are no simple ways of representing these diverse struggles and histories. Just as it is difficult to speak of a singular entity called "Western feminism," it is difficult to generalize about "third world feminisms." (Mohanty 4)

Literature Review

"Third world refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and third world peoples." (Mohanty x) Erasure of individuality and diversity at the expense of uniform categorization has to be taken into consideration. Mohanty proposes that just as, "'Western women' or 'white women' cannot be defined as coherent interest groups, 'third world women' also do not constitute any automatic unitary group." Discouraging the concept of sisterhood underpinning feministic analysis, she writes that "ideological differences in understandings of the social mediate any assumption of a "natural" bond between women." (Mohanty 7) Preconceived categorization and notions damage the true essence of complexity inherent to humanism. Hence, "defining third world women in terms of their "problems" or their "achievements" in relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy effectively removes them from history, freezing them in time and space." (Mohanty 7)

Retention of individuality is crucial for an individual; bearing in mind the various facets of the society in which Anjum was brought up, one has to locate her place in it first, as a Pakistani citizen; second, as a female. Aurakzai views Anjum's poetry to be marking the "development of the Eastern female consciousness" one that had been "hibernating due to the societal stereotypes." (ICPWE 6) Anjum's poetry has received much critical appreciation. M. Athar Tahir observes, "A valiant new voice, with a layered register, takes

in its domain all the heart vibrates to, and the inward eye surveys.” (WWPK 246) Furthermore, Rati Cooper praises Anjum’s work, “a gem of a collection and what a sensitive treasure.” (DISQUIETUDE 2) This acknowledgement is accompanied by that of Dr. Naveed Rehan who writes,

Nadia Anjum’s poetry utilizes delicate thought-images that tease the reader into joining in, finding the meaning of the poem along with the poet. Rather than spell out her ideas, Nadia’s poetry hints at them, giving the reader a glimpse of a fully thought-out reflection, like a crystallized rain-drop or a uniquely formed snowflake, waiting to be discovered behind her words.

(DISQUIETUDE 5)

Relocating the voices of third world women is significant as their “narratives are read and understood that is crucial, together with the need to locate them contextually.” (Hamam vi) She talks about the need to reclaim distinctiveness and intricacy inherent in women’s narratives and identities. Incorporating images from locality, snippets from day-to-day lives; historical, personal, and spiritual perspectives, her poetry as Taufiq Rafat writes, “emanates from the very land in which it is written. The cultural substratum that gives anchorage to its roots remains a variable source from which it gains nourishment and defines the self of the poet” (qtd. In Hayat 2) Through the following research the question regarding what has been considered as the stereotypical image of a woman from the third world country and how does Anjum’s poetry revoke them would be explored.

Strategical analysis allows to see this act as an attempt to colonize the knowledge about these women. Additionally, their experience of the world and various other practices are a part of their culture. For the truth to emerge, the “worldview” calls for deconstruction. (Oyewumi 12) However, there is and can be no fixed way of perceiving reality. It becomes imperative to consider that there is no questioning of the knowledge which people have been presented with. Mohanty questions the relevance of the concerns which have informed feminism, as they have been solely dictated by the West. Identifying with and highlighting the shortcomings of Western

feminism which has been based on its inclination towards Eurocentrism it fails to see the differences in insights regarding others' ideologies. She writes,

Western feminisms appropriate and "colonize" the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries. It is in this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World that power is exercised. (Mohanty 335)

Moreover, not only third world women's experiences but the way they choose to express their perspective on the various phenomenon of their life have also been classified. Hence, the women of color suffer double marginalization. First, at the hands of the manmade language that they use to express themselves through. This language is structured in a way that puts woman in the place of the other, the marginal, the periphery. Secondly, by being submerged under the umbrella of unitary feminist discourse. It carves the women belonging to the third world countries into a fixed state. Their voices, identities and experiences remain under a constant threat of silence and erasure by those in power.

Association of third world with notions of "underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and "overpopulation" ... [consequently these issues undermine] the everyday, fluid, fundamentally historical and dynamic nature of the lives of third world women." (Mohanty 6) Another important factor being that the "intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as "women" [and these] do not have identical effects on women in third world contexts." (Mohanty 13) These views can only be countered by focusing on the ability to articulate one's own self and experiences.

Discussion and Analysis

Nadia Anjum is a Pakistan based poet. Her poetry collections comprise of WOMAN.WOMAN@PK, DISQUIETUDE and Fairy Dust. Anjum's work is grounded in her Pakistani roots. Therefore, her expression reveals and at times revels her Pakistani identity.

The diversity of themes incorporated in her poetry work towards the re-formation of a Pakistani woman's identity. For instance, Starting from the notion of 'Self' in relation to the colonial masters, ...[and] the Hindus, today's Pakistani poets writing in English need to address issues and themes in relation to their own community and also in relation to the global community which has intruded into the national realm of Pakistan. Therefore, the subject invites a continuous analysis and evaluation. (Mansoor 36)

Woman.Woman@Pk, the first poetry collection by Anjum contains the life experiences of a Pakistani woman. Her observations are mature, and her style is more refined in this collection. The second collection titled *Disquietude* voices the poet's unrest regarding various aspects, events, experienced throughout her life. The second collection titled *DISQUIETUDE* contains over a hundred poems. As the title suggests, it voices the poet's unrest regarding various things she has experienced in her life. Anjum's poetry collections explore the relationship that a woman builds with her origins, herself and the environment.

Indefatigable Woman

Anjum's poetry reflects on the role played by societies in silencing the achievements and existence of Pakistani women in history. Her poetry de-shackles women belonging to the third world countries from the labels associated with them. Women of color have been labelled as,

religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward"), and sometimes revolutionary (read "their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight!") This is how the "third world difference" is produced. (Mohanty 72)

Anjum's portrayal of women defies the boxing of third world women. "Element," deals with the power of resilience and determination in women. Anjum sees women as beings who hold the power to look far ahead in time and master sharp wits; they are not weak at all. Along with these traits, a woman is also someone who is, "Indefatigable / The element that makes her / The queen..." (Disquietude 43) Woman performs multiple roles throughout her

life and that too simultaneously. Even then their energies continue to be in-exhaustive despite juggling between different tasks. She mentions three of the toughest women from history. Particularly, Zubaida, Mehrun-nisa and Arjumand.

Nehr - e – Zubaida is a canal, built 1200 years ago by the Iraqi Queen, Zubaidah Bint Jafar to cover the water shortage faced by pilgrims during Hajj. Mehrun-nisa also known as Nur Jahan, wife to the Mughal Emperor Jahangir also served as a Queen. Arjumand, Emperor Shah Jahan's wife, has Taj Mahal standing as a monument to her devotional love. These are the women from history who are known for their intelligence and advisory services to their King husbands. Therefore, the poem shows that woman has not been frail.

Women in Anjum's poetry are resilient and have acquired commendable leadership skills. The "assumption of women [from the third world] as an already constituted group, one which has been labeled "powerless," "exploited," "sexually harassed"" (Mohanty 56) does not hold true at all times. Therefore, the poem shows that there is much more to women from the third world than that which is represented through mass discourse.

"Knotted" celebrates the pre-occupation of the poetess and her grandmother. "As grandmother to her keys / I to my poems. / Outdoing each other / Each day / They keep raising / the bar. / Publicising a personal space / The emancipated / plunge / Positioned / Neo-feminism at stake." (DISQUIETUDE 69) Both the women can be seen devoted to their passions, constantly channeling their creative faculties to engage in the process of creation. Anjum's poem breaks "...the assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions." (Mohanty 55)

"Marathon 2016" applauds the determination, incredible strength, and physical endurance of Afghani women. Opting for a challenging competition, despite the many barriers they might be exposed to facing, she writes, "Hemmed / Russet-hued in / White shirts / The racers / Brave / Autumn chill / That unleashes / The Bamiyan discourse / As gautam speaks / Again / Sparks / Russet-

hued / The racing hearts.” (Disquietude 130) Reference to the Bamiyan discourse here, rekindles the spark of Afghan historical and cultural narratives. It takes the readers back to the destruction of statues of Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. An attempt to carve a void in the culture, heritage and identity of Afghans. The poetess raises the concern over the significance of preservation of history and narrative of a particular place and its people to avoid its complete erasure. Registering the participation of Afghani women in the competition could also be seen as a protest against the cultural vandalism conducted in 2001. Women become the torch bearers here, standing tall in the face of any historical violence that may occur again. These poems show that women from the third world countries are also empowered, in their own way.

Creative Process

Women from third world countries have often been referred to as those, who lack abilities to be expressive or creative and are rather suppressed. However, Behar through the example of Latin American women says that it would not be unusual if one day these women, “can emerge as thinkers, cosmologists, creators of worlds.” (qtd. in Escobar 177) The way world perceives third world women depends on how the writer, the critic, and the reporter chooses to portray these individuals. Anjum draws parallels between the poet and the creativity of a creator. She believes in the transformative power of creativity, for the creator and society as well.

“At Work,” compares a carpenter to a writer over the manner in which they both conceive and execute their ideas. Just like a carpenter goes step by step in order to create an object, a poet does the same. She writes, “Striking/Screwing/Far and wide/The hammer in hand /Angling the form/To an idea/Framed –/Pinned to/A poem/Carpenter/At work.” (Disquietude 27)

The process of creation involves a huge level of determination and attention to meticulous details from its creator. “Poetry is seen not as a conscious process but as natural surprise, an utterance arising from the non-rational processes of the mind.” (Wainwright 159) The poet can only wait for the right moment. Anjum experiments with a range of themes explored through her poetry. In a poem titled “Horizon,” she writes, “A fountain dug deep/Rayed out

darkness/Aside/Cleansed." (Disquietude 20) The fountain here could be a metaphorical fountain or a literal fountain pen as-well. In both cases, a deep core is dug out as one makes the journey to seek out the hidden truth. However, the way to truth is not simple. Therefore, one has to get past the darkness which misleads one for an ending. If writing is not carried out with responsibility, it would not serve the purpose of providing benefit to the readers.

"B-Bye!" is a rather interesting poem, subtly criticizing the attempt to eradicate the essence behind creating a piece of literature or art. The erasure carried out by replacing the purpose of literature from being a reforming platform with prioritizing materialistic gains. This shift has been made in order to help the business economy grow. Anjum writes,

Haven't you heard what they've said / and said it aloud / about pen
and page, / phrase and tone to the / world around, tagged and bound
/ by perky worth to / customer need and market trend- / selling IQ
at including price / your birds and bards / twittering slogans and
songs / against literature and art, no / longer a cultural prerequisite.
/ Business economy

(WWPK 37)

Society demands have altered, especially with the advancement of technology globally. Preferring learning through art and literature is no longer satiating the audience. Literature had to work as a social and a moral reformer and at times, religious too. In the wake of rising consumerism, artists and writers produce what sells. The poet laments the loss of creative faculties of the writer and the reception of the readers.

"A poem," gives the readers a breakdown of the thought process of a poet. It captures the steps the poet must undertake in order to express a thought as conceived by the poet. Anjum writes, "It comes / on its own- / seeded unaware / misting / over the / mountains: / speck by / speck- / greying / islands / till / they claim / the translucent / blue." (WWPK 34) Concrete imagery helps add fluidity to the thought process which in turn enables the poetess to birth a poem. A poem for that matter comes just like an epiphany, revealed at the right place and right time to the poet. In this context, poetry can be regarded superior to philosophy. In order to capture

creativity a dynamic quality is required and Anjum's poetry contains that quality.

Moreover, Pablo Neruda's philosophy reverberates through "Looking around." Neruda's poetry holds an irreplaceable ability to transport the reader to an entirely different dimension of the world. Celebrating everything the world encompasses. Feeling and acknowledging their presence and impact so profoundly, that it leaves the reader shook. Anjum writes, "Pink, white, blue / ensign painter's / sweep / dipped / dropped / winning a prominent place / on the quiet canvass / woven across the / timbered frame- / it threatens to over-take." (WWPK 139) Suddenly she recalls Neruda's instructions and, "I switch places / and return to the page / nodding to / Neruda's / advice / to a budding poet: / look around / deep into objects." (WWPK 139) To let creativity bloom, one has to dig into the deeper meaning of things. This allows the viewer to truly experience that object and feel one with it. Anjum takes inspiration from Neruda and believes that the experience of having a deep observation lives within one and breeds timeless creativity.

Gender Roles

"Rag Dolls" presents the audience with rhetorical questions that arise from catering to society's expectations. Should a woman be homebound or working? Anjum explores, "Blending garlic paste to / onion rings to / ginger shreds / the rag dolls bloomed / pureed / curried / the virtuous east dismisses / at their cost the other half / officially / custardized woman.woman@pk / sandwiched between / This or That?" (WWPK 178) As per prevailing societal norms individuals have been made to perceive themselves with regard to the gender imposed on them by society. Once gender is normalized certain roles associated with it are expected to be played by them and the self and gender makes individuals dangle between the two. The poet attempts to establish that both working and non-working women are equally significant as long as they are managing it and they decide to take either role. "...empowerment of [the] third world women [should be] based on the demystification of ideologies of gender and sexuality [regulated by societies] that

affect women's daily lives..." (Mohanty 5) This poem pleads for a more inclusive society.

"Differa'nce," resonates with Derrida's deconstruction. Anjum dissects gender roles, appreciating both genders varying roles available to them. For her, both sexes are equally worthy of respect. "Such simplistic formulations [gender roles] are historically reductive, they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women." (Mohanty 64) Anjum writes, "She / kneading clay / to mould terracotta toys. / He / bending reeds / to weave mats and boats. / Both at work / hewing / Icons." (WWPK 74) Both men and women are dedicated to their work and playing are involved in contributing to society. They are equally significant in the progression of society.

Gender construction distorts the way individuals in society perceive themselves and restrict them to certain roles which they can perform. Such act prevents the growth of an individual, his/her right to equality and being different, "Whining Power," explores gender construction. Anjum writes,

Four years old toddler / sprawled on the floor / whining about the / barbie doll / who would not / survive without him / he thought so- / young mother / tearfully forbidding / what was meant / not for him but girls- / he wasn't gender conscious yet- / public humiliation / for the young father / at the Mall of Lahore – / the shopkeeper grinned. (WWPK 233)

The mother, the father and then the shopkeeper – all three of them are involved in creating the box of male gender around the innocent child. However, it must be noticed that, "From a cross cultural perspective, the implications of Western bio-logic are far-reaching... gender constructs in feminist theory originated in the West, where men and women are conceived oppositionally and projected as embodied, genetically derived social categories." (Oyewumi 11) Therefore, Anjum suggests that neutrality towards both sexes should be practiced.

Conclusion

Labelling and categorization of a third world woman as a victim of suffering, illiteracy, ignorance and incompetence has been challenged by Anjum. The poet defies these notions by exercising her agency to communicate on a range of contributions made by South Asian women, many belonging to her own community and actively participating in uplifting it. She does not restrict and limit her perspective, rather delves deep into mysteries of one's culture, traditions, self and identity. Female poet from a third world country such as Pakistan is expected to produce content which justifies and clarifies the position of Eastern women, de-exoticising them for West. Anjum believes in being true to one's own self, allowing authenticity and genuineness to reverberate in the narrative. The poet being a third world woman, putting several aspects of women from her community in-front of the readers defies the categorization of women into a unified category. Anjum therefore reveals the organic individuality of Southeast Asian women through her poetry. Through her poetic expression, she liberates the third world woman, including herself and the readers.

The findings of the research have far reached implications in a globalized world. It offers a way of critically reading South Asian literature to preserve the indigenous. The poetry explored multiple facets of what it means to be a woman in Pakistan, subverting the monolith identity of Eastern women. It is not just an act of defiance but reclamation of identity and agency. A deeper understanding of the texts enables the readers to transcend the simplistic and pre-conceived labels. The research enriches the global dialogue on gender, race, and identity.

Works Cited

- Anantharam, Anita. "Engendering the Nation: Women, Islam, and Poetry in Pakistan." Article 14. *Journal of International Women's Studies* Vol.11 Issue. 1, Gender and Islam in Asia. November. 2009.
- Anjum, Nadia. *Woman.Woman@PK*. ADCO. 2016.
- DISQUIETUDE*. ADCO. 2017.
- Fairy Dust*. ADCO. 2019.
- Aurakzai, Tehreem Arslan. "The Call In Between: Women of the East." 2nd International Conference On Pakistani Anglophone Literature, Kinnaird College for Women Pakistan, 2018. Conference Presentation.
- Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Hamam, Kinana. *Confining Spaces, Resistant Subjectivities: Toward a Metachronous Discourse Of Literary Mapping and Transformation in Post-colonial Women's Writing*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.
- Hajiyeva. "Pakistani English Literature in a Multicultural Context." *Journal of Research Humanities*, 2016.
- Hayat, Hazrat. "Pakistanness in Taufiq Rafat's Selected Poems."
- Khan, Saima. "An Authentic Voice." 2nd International Conference On Pakistani Anglophone Literature, Kinnaird College for Women Pakistan, 2018. Conference Presentation.
- Mansoor, Asma. "The Notes of a New Harp: Tracing the Evolution of Pakistani Poetry in English Pakistaniaat." *A Journal of Pakistan Studies* Vol. 4, No. 1, 2012.

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, et al. Editor. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.
Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Said, W. Edward. *Yeats and Decolonization*.
Shamsie, Muneeza. "SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIMS: FICTION AND POETRY IN ENGLISH".
Religion & Literature, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 149-157. University of
Notre Dame. Jstor pg.155
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23049363>
---Hybrid Tapestries
- Oyěwùmí Oyèrónke, Editor. *African Gender Studies: A Reader*.
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a theory of Feminist Poetics."
- Taylor, Charles, et al. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of
Recognition*. Princeton
University Press, 1992.
- Wainwright, Jeffrey. *POETRY THE BASICS*. Routledge, 2004.
- .