

REASSERTING WESTERN DOMINANCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF AFGHAN
WOMEN IN SIBA SHAKIB'S *NACH AFGHANISTAN KOMMT GOTT NUR NOCH
ZUM WEINEN*

by

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Reasserting Western Dominance: Representations of Afghan Women in Siba Shakib's

Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Beverly M. Weber

The goal of this paper is to examine how Siba Shakib's novel *Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen* enters into a discussion that already claims to speak for and on behalf of Eastern women in general, the Afghan women in particular. This type of discourse has proven to not only perpetuate the marginalization of these individuals, already located in the peripheries, but also erases the voice of those minority women working to create a space that allows the Third World woman to speak on her own behalf. This paper examines the use of space, imagery, power, and sex within the narrative to paint a picture that is meant to highlight the perceived "plight" and "struggles" of women in Afghanistan.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

In December 2001 Siba Shakib's book *Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen: Die Geschichte der Shiron-Gol* was first published in Germany, and later went on to become an international bestseller, translated into twenty-seven languages in sixteen countries. Due to a combination of factors--the timing of the book's release (post-September 11, 2001), subject matter, and popularity--the goal of this paper will be to analyze this narrative in order to understand how it functions within a broader hegemonic discourse of the suffering and oppression of Afghan women. I propose that while Shakib sets about addressing a particular set of disparities within Afghan culture, the subjugation of women, she simultaneously narrows the lens through which her reader views the culture. My aim is to show that a Western discourse on the lives of women in Afghanistan, as exemplified in this text, presented as one of constant suffering, is inherently problematic; it is both reductive and marginalizing, and echoes the ideals of a Western cultural supremacy that claims the authority to define the East as "Other" and denies the ability to self-define/-identify.

Overview

As a result of a post-civil rights era shift in cultural politics, there has been an increase in attention across various disciplines and perspectives, such as anthropological, psychological, historical, etc., to issues of race, gender, and constructed spaces as represented in film and media, art and literature, governmental policies and practices, etc. Focusing on a transnational feminist cultural studies perspective, feminist movements in

the Western world have worked towards a reality where all may equally enjoy the freedom of being and of self. However, Third World feminist have continuously criticized depictions of minority women, especially those of the Eastern woman, from a Western perspective geared towards a Western audience. Whether intentional or not, the trend within this Western discourse has been to marginalize and consolidate the experiences of minority women into one presumed, all-inclusive package. Lila Abu-Lughod joins numerous scholars, arguing the dangers of reifying culture from its dynamic political history, noting the potential for an abusive (mis)representation of what she considers to be "cultural icons," such as the Muslim woman (Abu-Lughod 783).

Problematics

It is within the broader confines of the idea of representation, or rather misrepresentation, of culture that Shakib's work presents itself to be problematic. Culture and cultural practices are at the heart of the work but, as Stuart Hall notes in "The Art of Representation," culture does not consist of things, but rather of a set of practices. Therefore, Hall notes, "culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways" (Hall 2). Historically, the Western world has held a certain fascination with the East; there has been, and continues to be, a desire to "know" the East. As verified by colonial expansion, one possible result of this fascination is that a culture and its values and practices may be at risk of becoming discursively reified, thus readily consumable by the Western world. Some scholars have argued that it is only through the participants that cultural practices develop their meanings; that in the hands of one outside the culture, an item, idea, or practice can lose its meaning or take on an entirely different significance.

The point here, however, is not to evaluate how meaning is made, but rather to show how the historical context of this particular way of interpreting a life story, Shakib's interpretation in this particular instance, limits the understanding of the lives of Afghan women. A prime example of this can be found in the discourse in France surrounding the donning of the *burqa* in public spaces. In the discourse, the tradition of wearing the *burqa* and similar garments becomes conflated with political issues, and morphs from a symbol of a woman's modesty, respectability, or dedication to religious practice to a purely outward representation of oppression and suffering at the hands of domineering male forces (Abu-Lughod 785). This change leaves no space for a space in between, but rather creates a binary opposition of either-or.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIC CONTEXTUALIZATION

The Occident and the Orient

When attempting to understand today's Western society, society post-September 11, 2001, Edward Said notes that our understanding of the present is rooted in our understanding of the past. Likewise, our understanding of past is informed by our understanding of the present. These temporal realities co-exist with one another. Edward Said notes in *Cultural and Imperialism* that much of the understanding of the Western world's colonization of other territories has come from political and economic discourses of history. Furthermore, he asserts that very little attention has been given to the "privileged role of culture in the modern imperial experience" and how that experience still structures cultural exchange (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 5). Said notes a wide range of debate in regards to when, where, and if imperialism happened, whether it was primarily economic or to what extent it spread, there has been a growing resistance to use the word in general (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 5). Failing to tackle this concept with some sense of uniformity, he asserts, has produced a gray area that leaves imperialist ideologies unchecked, able to run amok within the realm of the cultural sphere.

As Shakib's text deals with the East in general, Afghanistan and Islam in particular, the idea of an imperialist perspective conditioning cultural production is especially concerning. The historical relationship between the Occident and Orient has been one of domination, violence, manipulation and oppression, lending to the Occident relative dominion, control, and the ability to both define and know the Orient with little opposition. In their own research, Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan cite

Said asserting that from the Western perspective, the justification for its historic self-representation vis-à-vis the East has been its claims to enlightenment, civil progress, and emancipation, implying (and often directly asserting) an absence thereof in the East. It was through this representation that the West was able to legitimate and perpetuate its might and sovereignty over the colonies under the guise of protector.¹

During the colonial period, some of the primary means of disseminating information over the East to the general public, reaffirming Western rationalism and domination, have been travelogues, journals, literary and religious texts. Said discusses three major, contributing factors that helped foster the politicizing of the Near East:

- 1) [T]he history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West; 2) the struggle between the Arabs and Israeli Zionism, and its effects upon American Jews as well as upon both the liberal culture and the population at large; 3) the almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam. (Said *Orientalism* 26 - 27)

Said posits, far too often society tends to favor the idea that literature and history are devoid of political bias. However, only when politics and history are viewed in tandem can society and literary culture really be understood in the broader scheme.

Returning to do Mar Castro Valera and Dhawan, it is important to note that there is scholarship arguing against contemporary perceptions of the relationship between the Occident and the Orient. The primary argument would confine imperial conquest to

¹ Der Okzident stellt sich in der Begriffsfolge des Orientalismus in Abgrenzung vom Orient als aufgeklärt, zivilisiert und emanzipiert dar und legitimiert damit selbst gewaltvolle territoriale Beherrschungen über Kolonien oder so genannte Protektorate. (do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan 31)

France, the British Empire, and later the United States in regards to the Far East.

However, Said argues that Germans expressed their colonizing efforts of the East not in physical acts, but rather through education (Said *Orientalism* 129; Ciarlo 66). It was through the universities, he recounts, that Germany was able to exert their dominance, with scholarship simultaneously "othering" the East as well as claiming the authority to know it. We can take Max Müller's 1883 work *India* as an example of a long history of the German Orientalist tradition worthy of discussing. Scholars, beginning with Max Müller, researched and presented an idea of the East, never having set foot on the soil, within very specific contexts. Their representation presenting a dichotomy of the East; the "good Orient" being exoticized, while the "bad Orient" is stigmatized as dangerous (Der >gute Orient< wird exotisiert, während der >böse Orient< als bedrohlich stigmatisiert wird [do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan 33]). However, do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan argue that, while there is certainly sufficient evidence to support his claims of a dominating Western discourse, Said's arguments aren't applicable post-imperialism, citing representations of Islam in the Maghreb. They assert that

Said totalisiert dabei nicht nur den westlichen Diskurs, sondern auch den Diskurs des Orients. So beschreibt er den Orientalismuskurs als einen Versuch, die arabische Welt - konkret den Mittleren Osten - zu beherrschen, um dann auch Indien, Indonesien und Japan in seine Analysen mit einzubeziehen, ohne konkrete Kontextualisierungen durchzuführen. (do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan 39)

It is with this idea that I find the connection to Shakib's book. She seems to be ambiguously located in the discourse. She seems to advocate a broader understanding of

a complex history of Afghanistan riddled with problems caused by Western intervention, yet from a Western feminist position, favors the idea of helping or "saving" the Afghan woman from her plight.

It is apparent that there is still debate on the presence of Orientalist and colonialist effects in contemporary society. As the historical nature of the Orient has been a political one, to address the presence of colonialism and orientalism, it is imperative that we understand how representations created through the use of political knowledge can conceal or misconstrue information. The methods utilized for forming our understanding of history must be unraveled so that we may question our thinking if we are to move beyond the deeply entrenched practices of our predecessors. To begin, we must understand that "[d]as dichotome Repräsentationsystem folgt erneut einem Stereotypenregime, das den Orient als weiblich, irrational und primitiv im Gegensatz zum maskulin-rationalen Westen konstruiert" (do Mar Castro Varela and Dhawan 34).

Colonial Feminism

As we have discovered, the "material reality of different groups of women can lead to very different perceptions of the nature of political struggle" (Ashcroft 94). In the 1980s feminist critics began acknowledging that much of the Western feminist discourse failed to properly account for the experiences of Third World women. Western feminists had fallen into the trap of categorizing all female efforts into one, universal idea of "woman" or "feminine" that stemmed from a white middle-class, Euro-centric bias. Moreover, recently critics have recognized that "colonialism operated very differently for women and for men, and the 'double colonization' that resulted when women were subject both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as

women..." have been left out of most analysis of colonial oppression (Ashcroft 93-94).

This is the perspective from which the analysis of Shakib's book will be direct.

CHAPTER III

CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION

Overview

In the following sections, a brief overview of both Siba Shakib as author, journalist, filmmaker, and political activist, and her book *Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen* will be presented. There will be a short introduction of Afghanistan's history and cultural practices with emphasis on the experiences of women. As Shakib's book focuses on the experiences of Afghan women as "victim," it is important to discuss the rise of testimonial/victim literature in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, and how/what that discourse added to broader discussion of the East. Looking at the use of the victims' experiences will help contextualize the strategies utilized by the German government in order to justify its intervention in the United States-Afghan War. A close reading, focusing on the themes of constructed space, representation through imagery, power & resistance, female agency, and sex/sexuality in Shakib's narrative will aid in conceptualizing the magnitude of these discursive practices. To conclude, a discussion on suggested actions Western feminists may take in order to create a space that allows for the West to contribute to minority women's efforts towards equality--without simply exchanging one form of domination for another--will be addressed.

Siba Shakib

Siba Shakib is an Iranian-German filmmaker, journalist, author, and political advisor to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) living and working between New York, Germany, and Italy. She was born in Iran where she attended a German

school in Tehran. She received her Master of Arts (M.A.) from the Ruprecht-Karl-Universität-Heidelberg. She currently has two international bestselling books, the one to be discussed here, and her second work entitled *Samira und Samir*. Shakib has received numerous prizes, including the Peter Surava P.E.N. award, for her first novel *Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen* as well as a German Human Rights film award. Her works focus primarily on social and economic issues faced by the poor, particularly women. In 2002, due to her knowledge of Afghanistan, the German Ministry of Defense sought Shakib, extending an invitation to become an advisor to the Internationale Sicherheitsunterstützungstruppe (International Security Assistance Force), a United Nations mandated peace troop in Afghanistan; this later extended to activity with NATO. To date, Shakib has published three literary works and produced a combination of eight films and award winning documentaries.

Nach Afghanistan kommt Gott nur noch zum Weinen recounts the experiences of the protagonist's (Shirin-Gol) life in war-torn Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet Invasion to the rise of the Taliban regime. Her life is presented as one of inequality, destitution, abuse, oppression, and sacrifice. The narrative covers issues ranging from violence against women, forced marriages, rape and prostitution, to issues of exile, attempted suicide, and drug addiction. Numerous sources have noted Shakib as describing her book as being neither autobiographical -- as it was initially received -- nor fictitious, but rather as a work of "faction," noting that the narrative consists of the experiences of an actual Shirin-Gol, but also an amalgamation of stories and experiences of other women. This, she claims, was done in order to protect the identity of the real Shirin-Gol from any backlash that might have ensued as a result of the book.

When looking at this book from a cultural studies perspective, one finds several common Western themes and practices, which are often left unchecked or unquestioned. Shakib utilizes techniques that challenge preconceived understandings of Afghan cultural practices in order to construct a narrative that simultaneously emphasizes the strength and plight of Afghan women. This representation, however well intended, produces a series of disconcerting claims that reinforces colonialist, Orientalist, and patriarchal discourses of the East as well as eastern women. Moreover, this work can be seen as one that perpetuates the divide within feminist discourses with regards to minority women in general, and Third World women in particular.

History of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse and expansive space. In order to begin understanding gender as it relates to this narrative, we must understand it as it relates to ethnicity. Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, consisting of forty-percent of the total population, residing mainly in the south and east. For the Pashtuns, their customary law, *Pashtunwali*, dictates that it is "the absolute duty of men to protect the respectability of women and to protect the integrity of the homeland" (Rostami-Povey 4). However, this does not necessarily relegate women to a passive role. Some Pashtun sub-categories adhere to a matrilineality charter of *Pashtunwali*, which allows women to exercise power more strictly than men. In the west, mainly in Kabul, there are more ethnic groups; Tajiks, Hazarajat, and many other smaller groups. These groups are less similar to the Pashtuns of the east. Although their adherence to *Pashtunwali* law follows a more patriarchal understanding of issues of honor, shame, and gender relations, it is important to note that these communities do not claim a specific, ethnic monopoly over

these norms and values (Rostami-Povey 5). These are the groups from which Shakib's narrative draws its inspiration. This is important to note as overlooking or ignoring this particular detail has the potential to (unintentionally) produce a biased, erroneous, or even homogenizing depiction of a particular group or groups.

Each location, its people, and ideologies are unique and determined by history. Afghanistan is no different. There has never been any one continuous idea of gender and gender relations, as they are historically specific. "They are determined by social, economic, class, political and legal as well as cultural and religious factors" (Rostami-Povey 8). With each warring period, whether ethnic conflicts in terms of civil wars and Taliban rule or foreign invasion, there have been shifting cultural norms leading to a fluidity of gender relations.

Throughout these instances of restiveness, according to Elaheh Rostami-Povey, women have always negotiated gender in different forms. In certain instances, some women were able to invoke the institutions of *mahram*² and *chaddari* or *burqa*³ to employ men's services as public escorts, which provided more flexibility than previously afforded women in the social context (Rostami-Povey 6). On other occasions, they would exercise their agency and autonomy by arranging secret meetings where they organize channels for disseminating oppositional information. In doing so, they were able to break "pre-defined spaces of confinement and silence," thus fracturing the idea of the submissive, Muslim woman (Rostami-Povey 7). Rostami-Povey also points out that during these instances of social unrest and warring, many men also aspired to move away

² To be accompanied by a their husbands or blood male relatives. (Rostami-Povey 6)

³ A garment that covers the body from head to foot, typically worn by females in Islamic countries.

from the "unrealistic" expectation of total male domination. Her point is that during this time, women did not necessarily see themselves as separate from men, but rather acknowledged that their needs and the demands placed upon them were different than those of men. Ultimately, however, the economic, social and political forces acting on them were the same. Shakib portrays this idea within the relationship of Shirin-Gol and her husband, Morad. Although she paints this relationship beautifully, I assert that she fails to capitalize on an opportunity to challenge the Western conception that all Afghan men are in favor of those traditional, patriarchal ideologies of male dominance and supremacy.

Afghanistan's history is filled with oscillating support for women's rights. Scholars, such as Fahima Vorgetts, argue that inequalities, such as male forced polygamous relationships (which often times led to rivalries among the wives), unequal shares of household responsibilities (favoring the male), and forced marriages all existed when she was a child, but that policies "...had vacillated between the extremely conservative and the more progressive throughout the twentieth century" (Vorgetts 94). After the establishment of the Durand Line, which marked the boundary between Afghanistan and the British Empire, and later became the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, British forces left Afghanistan. At that point rivaling Pashtun and non-Pashtun ethnic groups vied for control. As a result, power-holders employed various methods in order to divide and rule.

Within the various reform strategies incorporated, provisions of healthcare, education, and a degree of women's rights were introduced (Rostami-Povey 10). However, dissatisfaction and turmoil led to frequent changes in governmental leadership;

thus frequent policy reforms, particularly the omission and reintroduction of women's rights. In the early 1970s, a divided faction of pro-Soviet and U.S.-Afghan elites attempted, yet again, to reform land and family laws, gearing them towards provisions for healthcare and women's rights based on a Western model. However, a lack of understanding of Afghan society and failure to address the needs of the majority caused resentment among the Afghan people, which led to a revolt of the rural population. This failure resulted in education becoming "...associated with humiliation, foreign domination, and everything that was un-Islamic and anti-Islamic" (Vorgetts 96). I will return to this idea in chapter four. Even then, however, it is important to note that the revolt was linked more to the regime and its Soviet ties, and not so much against women's rights or a modernizing state (Rostami-Povey 11).

After the Second World War, things changed in Afghanistan, but not significantly for all. In the 1960s and during the Soviet invasion, things changed for a minority of people in Afghanistan, particularly women. Women of the upper- and middle-classes in Kabul enjoyed newfound "freedom:" the ability to move about publicly without *chaddari* and *mahram*, access to education, and a wide array of employment opportunities (Mehta and Mamoor 24, Rostami-Povey 11). In the late 1970s, post-Soviet invasion, the U.S.-backed Afghan *Mujaheddin* rebelled against what they considered to be another foreign invader in their country. British control was replaced by U.S. influence across the Middle and Far East. However, very few in Afghanistan benefitted, especially the rural population.

In the 1980s, more discontent grew out of the instability and inequality within the country. This led to the rise of a conservative group known as the Taliban. Their aim was

to restore Afghanistan to a state of peace, and adhere to *Pashtunwali* law as opposed to the *Shariya* (divine law). As mentioned earlier, it is important to note *Pashtunwali* was practiced differently in different areas amongst different ethnic groups. Moreover, we must be cognizant that *Pashtunwali* is not just about punishment; it also emphasizes positive attributes, such as hospitality (Rostami-Povey 23). When the Taliban came to power, women were already exercising their agency both for and against Taliban control. There were a percentage of women who wholly supported the efforts of the Taliban as well as those who opposed it. One such oppositional group was the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) who fought for human rights in general, and particularly the rights of women. It is interesting to note, though, that women were still allowed certain liberties; some even practiced medicine in Kabul under Taliban rule. The Taliban justified this decision by asserting there needed to be female doctors to attend female patients.

Although women were allowed some liberties, life under Taliban rule became increasingly more difficult and dangerous. Some argue that inaccurate representations of the true spirit of Islam in the *Qur'an* were the cause for this mistreatment of women (Nadim 36). Rape and murder became commonplace, and forced marriages were commonly practiced, although Islamic law forbade it, and allowed for underage women to divorce their husbands upon the "age of the majority" (Rostami-Povey 23). Regardless of the time period or governmental regime, however, women have always held and will continue to hold a vital role in Afghan culture and tradition. As mentioned previously, many women do not consider themselves separate from their families, but rather as an essential part thereof. This has led to the production of a complex social dynamic in

which women are highly respected both within the home and the community, and at the same time maltreated.

The Rise of Testimonial Literature

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, political parties and the media began to focus on the maltreatment of women in Afghanistan for a variety of political reasons. As Iris Marion Young notes, "[w]hile the Bush administration initially justified the war as a defensive action necessary to protect Americans, its rhetoric quickly supplemented this legitimation with an appeal to the liberation of Afghan women" (Young 3). Post-September 11, 2001 there was an influx of books addressing the lives of women in Afghanistan flooding the literary market. A large percentage of these titles were classified as either testimonial literature or victim narratives. The intention of these testimonials was to bring aid to these people and awareness to the problems in these designated areas. The problem with these, as with most, testimonials is that its voice ultimately speaks to the experiences of only one particular person (within a larger group), at one fixed point in time, and in one particular location. This is not to suggest there is no value in testimonial literature; that is clearly not the case. However, as Robert Carr suggests, the process of "speaking **for**" (Vertretung) packaged as "speaking **about**" (Darstellung) is "itself caught up in the mechanisms of production, the shift of value/labor power from the Third World to a First..." (Carr 157). In other words, claiming to speak for someone presented as speaking about them (the Third World subject), the speaker takes his/her voice, silences him/her, and produces something that is consumable to the First World participant.

Carr argues that a desire for access to the "Third World subaltern," as a means of "cheap, surplus labor to be superexploited in production of surplus values (money, leisure, sex) for the comforts of ruling class men, their allies, their wives, and their patriarchal, middle-class managers, male and female alike" (Carr 155), has been a driving force behind a national reconceptualization for Western, leftist academics. He cites debates surrounding U.S. governmental policies and exclusionary practices of the First World mass media, with regards to the Persian Gulf War, in the construction of a culture that is an "accommodating allegory of consciousness of the Third World in the First" (Carr 155).

Looking at factors such as, who is speaking, for whom they are speaking, and from where they are speaking, Carr sees the emergence of testimonial literature in the Western world as an engagement in a perpetual historical process that "others" world communities in order to amass knowledge, thus strengthening power for the West (Carr 155). If we assume Shakib follows this historic pattern in her writing, and I do, we can argue that instead of aestheticizing testimony, she politicizes literature. In doing so, Carr asserts that a series of problems arise. First, the subject of the testimonial, typically from an oppressed community, works with someone who is able to provide means of accessing the market and commodifying their experience. Secondly, when the commodity enters the Western world market, the Third World subject steadily loses his/her place in the Western discourse, and, as a result of the "elite reader's ignorance", becomes a metonym for the ethnic group from which s/he comes (Carr 156), thus conflating "literature" with "reality." To counter this, she asserts, requires readers to engage in thorough reading and analysis of Third World women's texts (Carr 157), focusing on the fact that the subaltern

woman has been, historically, either excluded from or set to the periphery of the constructed literary sphere of the hegemonic classes. The problem, however, is that this is rarely accomplished by the academic community, let alone the lay reading audience.

Post-September 11, 2001, an increased political and academic interest in the Middle East no doubt played a vital role in the proliferation of Afghan-centered, testimonial literature. Images and narratives of *burqa*- and *niqab*-clad Afghan women began pervading the media, becoming what Carr refers to as the constructed "transcendental signified" (Carr 159). In other words, garments are equated with all peoples indigenous to Afghanistan, the land itself, (male) Islamic oppression, and terrorism, thus giving rise to white, U.S. and European anxiety over the increasingly politicized representations of Afghan people.

9/11 and German Intervention in the U.S.-Afghanistan War

The next section will focus on the reception and discourse of Islam in Germany and the role Shakib's book may have played in the U.S.-Afghan war. Beverly M. Weber notes that in 2003 there was a rise in autobiographies in Germany addressing the struggles of immigrant and Muslim women. However, many of these autobiographies -- Weber cites Necla Kelek's *Die fremde Braut* and Seyran Ateş's *Große Reise ins Feuer* -- were written by women who claim the authority to "represent" immigrant women's concerns (Weber 200), yet did not identify with Islamic culture, but rather championed against it as a means of gaining access to German society (Weber 206).

The problems that accompany the works of Kelek, Ateş, and the like is that they become seen as the representative voice of/for an entire group of people, here immigrant women, while obscuring the voices and works of lesser-known activists. These narratives

portray violence against women as inherent in Islamic culture. Of course, the goal here is not to deny or reduce the presence or significance of violence against women, for violence is an unfortunate reality within Muslim countries as well as any other. Instead, the aim is to point out the way the issue of violence against women has been oversimplified and conflated with political issues in order to justify military intervention by the German state.

After the United States declared its "War On Terror," the German state, with the aid of these autobiographical narratives and minority representatives -- minority in both the social and political context -- justified its intervention in the war, for which it had no vested interest, under the guise of liberating women from an oppressive regime. This idea echoed the theme of "saving brown women," which will be addressed later. Germany's rationale hinged partially on understandings of violence against women via "honor crimes" and other reasons they attribute to "Muslim culture" (Weber 214). However, this claim was part of an already larger discourse in which the German state asserted its national and transnational identity "by claiming to be the proper guardian of (immigrant) women's rights [human rights], primarily framed as Muslim women's rights" (Weber 200), which remained in line with the discussions that outlined the fundamental understanding of national identity around the juxtaposition of Islam and the female body (Weber 201). The academic community had even chimed in on the discussion, focusing on issues of the veil, which will be addressed in the literary analysis section of chapter four.

Those writers who gained media recognition, and claimed the authority to speak on behalf of these groups, became detriments to those groups seeking to work against

violence in effective ways. Their narratives presumed a simplistic and reductive relationship that linked Islam and violence. In Germany, the discussion of Islam and women's rights focused on and continue to be shaped by two assumptions: that "Islam and women's rights to bodily integrity are mutually exclusive, and that Muslim women are unable to participate in activism for gender equality and women's rights, particularly if they retain their religious affiliation" (Weber 205).

CHAPTER IV

LITERARY ANALYSIS

The Exotic East

The following section will focus on a close reading analysis of Shakib's text, focusing on the themes of constructed spaces, imagery, power & resistance, and sex/sexuality. This text helps highlight the importance of both historical and narrative specificity when considering the intersectionality between and conflation of identity, politics, and experience.

During the nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of information over the Orient and its inhabitants disseminated throughout Europe. However, as early as the Crusades, there had been an "ignorant but complex" understanding of the Islamic culture (Said *Orientalism* 55). Although he focuses specifically on Africa, Chinua Achebe asserts that European imperialists provided a quasi-mythology of the Orient that depicted these "Others" as savage, subhuman, and incapable of speech; they were exotic, hostile and dangerous, and highly sexualized creatures who needed to be conquered, thus civilized, to the extent that they could be civilized (Leitch 1781). Said notes, those depictions stemmed "not only from contemporary attitudes and popular prejudices but also...the conceit of nations and scholars" (Said *Orientalism* 53).

Constructed Space

I will now discuss the construction of spaces within the narrative. What we see happening in this narrative is the emergence of a fount of historical information coupled with ideological, social and political analysis that goes far beyond Afghanistan. The "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an

unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary" (Said *Orientalism* 54), as the group(s) being categorized in the imaginative geography does not have to recognize nor agree with the categorization. Moreover, these geographical metaphors, territory, domain, soil, horizon, region, landscape, geopolitics, etc. are equally geographical and strategic. This, according to Foucault, is only natural as "geography grew up in the shadow of the military" (Foucault 69), thus adding to the complications of using demography to address issues of one's home. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts, the weight of histories of struggles is undoubtedly coupled with the "hidden" demographics of any particular location. Therefore, works that address demographic information function "to ground and concretize race, class, and gender conflicts" (Mohanty 90).

The narrative presents images of various locations, all in a state of chaos and utter disarray. Everyone our protagonist encounters is either in flight, seeking asylum outside the Afghan borders, or currently residing inside a refugee camp. The representations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the intermediary locations are presented as locations of danger, oppression, ruin and squalor, especially for women⁴. As far as the narrative is concerned, Afghanistan consists of women forced to have an abundance of children they

⁴ After having intercourse with the smuggler-chief, by whom she is impregnated, the following is asserted:

"Gott hilft Shirin-Gol nicht. Er nimmt diese Bilder der Schmach, der Schande nicht aus ihrem Kopf...Und selbst das Wissen, dass viele Hunderte, Tausende afghanischer Frauen es gemacht haben wie sie, tröstet Shirin-Gol nicht. Und auch das Wissen, dass es in Pakistan einen Markt gibt, wo afghanische Frauen angeboten und verkauft werden wie Vieh, tröstet sie nicht. Manche der Mädchen sind dreizehn, zwölf, elf oder auch nur neun Jahre alt...Alles das weiß Shirin-Gol. Und sie weiß, dass der einzige Ausweg aus dieser Schande ihr Tod ist. Sie weiß es. Sie weiß nur nicht, was sie mit ihren Kindern machen soll." (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 99-100)

neither want nor can afford to have, over-crowded refugee camps, reeking of urine and despair, or sites of hostility, conflict, and bombings⁵. The Western reader's perception -- based on exclusion and secured by terror -- of the eastern "Other" is essentially (re)affirmed by the interweaving re-presentation of demographic and geographic information and personal relationships and encounters.

"Being Home"

Based on Mohanty's interpretation of Minnie Bruce Pratt's autobiography, I would like to discuss the implications of the narrative's use of the space designated as "home." Mohanty (2003) distinguishes between the concepts of "being home," and "not being home." She asserts that

"[b]eing home" refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; "not being home" is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (Mohanty 90)

The Western reader is presented with this text at the height of September 11, 2001.

Therefore, for the Western audience, Afghanistan becomes a problematic geographic location, having acquired a new significance and function -- due in part to political

⁵ Wahrscheinlich hat Shirin-Gols Mutter, wie all Mütter dieser Welt, bei der Geburt ihrer fünften Tochter, ihres neunten Kindes, große Schmerzen durchgestanden, und wahrscheinlich hat sie sich in diesem Moment überlegt, wie sie mit ihrem ohnehin geschwächten Körper und schlaffen Brüsten noch ein weiteres Kind stillen soll...Nein, Allah ist gütig und hat ihr dieses Mal nur eine Tochter geschickt. Genau genommen ist der Herrgott immer gütig gewesen zu Shirin-Gols Mutter. Er hat ihr als erstes Kind einen Sohn in den Bauch gelegt, sodass ihr Mann sich wie ein echter Mann fühlen konnte, ihr weder die Zähne ausschlagen noch sich von ihr scheiden lassen oder sie in ihr Vaterhaus zurückbringen musste. (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 17 - 18)

activity and the media -- as a site of personal, national, and historic attack/conflict. The audience, now bombarded with a call for solidarity, is striving for the lost feeling of "being home," for safety. However, the idea of "not being home," the realization that home is a construction, of the *simulacra*,⁶ is omitted or recessed even further into the depths of the collective psyche, replaced with an irrational fear that amplifies the division, exclusion, and oppression of those deemed to be "Other."

Now plastered over the international media scene, images of *burqa*- and *hijab*-clad women in arid landscapes, cities in ruin, and refugee camps all become stable and familiar locations that witness and obscure race, gender, and class struggles. The narrative now equates "home" for the Afghan woman to that of a prison, an idea that was later reflected in an address given by former First Lady Laura Bush, in response to military measures taken in Afghanistan. She is quoted as having said "[b]ecause of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment" (Abu-Lughod 784). For the Western viewer, women are essentially confined to home without the possibility of leaving or bettering themselves. In one instance, Shirin-Gol's father is meant to speak on behalf of the attitudes of all Afghan men in general, but specifically with regards to women becoming educated. He asserts:

Diese Ungläubigen wollen uns entehren. Mädchen, die in die Schule gehen, werden verwirrt, werden neugierig, wissen zu viel, sie werden habgierig, sie werden Dinge verlangen, sie werden wählerisch. Welcher Mann will so eine Frau noch heiraten? (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 34)

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacres Et Simulation*. Paris: Galilée, 1981. Print.

The problem here is that the context for this mentality is left unclear. There is no link between education and resentment towards the foreign invader. They were not particularly opposed to education, but rather to the fact that education was seen as indistinguishable from the foreign invaders. As a result of this aversion to education, women are portrayed as uneducated, voiceless, and oppressed. In one instance, the narrative goes as far as to refer to women as clothing that expresses itself through gesturing:

Frauen unter ihren Tücher tuscheln, streifen Shirin-Gols Arme, ihren Kopf, ihre Wange. Ein Tuch spricht sie an, es hat Hunger, will Brot, will Arbeit. Ein anderes Tuch legt seine Hand auf ihren Rücken, zieht sie zu sich hoch, wischt Tränen aus Shirin-Gols Augen und sagt, zeig keine Schwäche, das ist doch alles was sie wollen. Wir sollen Schwäche zeigen, damit sie sich stark fühlen. Das Tuch umarmt Shirin-Gol, drückt sie. Es ist eine kräftige Umarmung. Das Tuch besänftigt Shirin-Gols Zittern und Beben. (Shakib 278)

Henceforth, Afghanistan has become a place that does not exist as a legitimate space for women -- a space for white, Western women.

A Totalizing Feminist Discourse

All too often in a push for social justice, some mainstream Western feminists push for equal rights for all women everywhere. However, scholars such as Inderpal Grewal, Judith Butler, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, to name only a few, believe that this type of discourse, especially when including the lives of women of color, is inadequate. Their idea hinges on the premise that this type of totalizing feminist discourse is really only

adequate to articulate the situation of white women in the West. In responding to the rhetoric that addresses women of color, those feminists often reproduce those more conventional articulations.

It is, as Mohanty asserts, through this type of inclusion, that white middle-class feminist's are able to add on difference "without leaving the comfort of home". Mohanty even asserts that, consequently, it reaffirms the locating of "feminism" to the Western world in the discussion of the "West-East divide" (Mohanty 87). What we tend to see in these discussions is that in seeking to promote advancement for women of color -- women in the East -- the Western discourse tends to label the brown woman as victim, in need of saving from the brown man, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it (Spivak 298). There is, essentially, the replacement of one form of domination for another, denying the brown woman her situatedness in the social, therefore refusing to acknowledge her "institutional home" (Mohanty 88, Weber 201-02). As Lila Abu-Lughod puts it, with regards to saving the Afghan women, "[w]hen you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her *to* something...Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners..." (Abu-Lughod 788-89).

Temporal Space

I assert that space is not only of the physical, but is also located within the temporal, as history. Realizing that there is no way Shakib could have foreseen the coming events of September 11, 2001 or its ensuing aftermath, the fact that these events did happen and that the book was released during this time, still plays a significant role in the relationship of constructed geography and history of the East by the Western world.

In other words, had September 11 never happened, this work would have nonetheless been contributing to already active discourse.

Shakib presents a picture of war-torn Afghanistan through the eyes of her protagonist, Shirin-Gol. Because her intentions are to stay as true to the "real" Shirin-Gol's life experiences, she cannot do much to alter the referential point in time. There were indeed wars involving invasion by the Soviets, the Jihadi Islamic fundamentalists (*mujahedeen*), and the Taliban within the timeframe of the narrative. However, in the depiction of these events, Shakib neglects to address the fact that the *mujahedeen*, supported by the power of the West, served as the "backbone" of the Northern Alliance throughout this period until the events leading to September 11, 2001, thus concealing the West's involvement in the ongoing disparities in Afghanistan she so adamantly advocates against.

Weeda Mansoor asserts that although women and children suffered the greatest atrocities under the *mujahedeen*, there seems to always be an exertion of power in the form of a "selective amnesia" in the Western world working to erase the memory of the support given to the *mujahedeen* and its leader, Rabbani-Masood, after the fall of the Soviet regime in 1992 (Mansoor 70). Shakib focuses solely on the violence committed against women during this time period without proper contextualization. Because she writes primarily for a Western audience, neglecting to address the West's role during this period could easily be argued as (indirectly) perpetuating a Western colonial discourse in order to appease the target audience's desire to see and know the East; Afghanistan, as home to the violent, dangerous, exotic, and backwards "Other."

Women at Arms

Continuing the examination of constructed spaces, Shakib often depicts not only a social and hierarchical divide between men and women, but also a physical divide. It is a common cultural practice that mandates limited comingling of the sexes in social settings. However, Shakib's narrative coalesces this cultural practice with aspects of the women's movement against the oppressive governmental regime, thus resulting in a portrayal of a powerless, discontented, Afghan female collective. Considering the timeframe of the narrative as well as the context of the females' gathering, one finds a missed opportunity to address the emergence of social and political organizations such as RAWA in Afghanistan. These organizations consisted of women struggling against a multitude of injustices ranging from the criminalization of abortion, tolerance/acceptance of domestic violence, and *sati*,⁷ to the trafficking of women and girls for sex and domestic slavery, etc. (Mansoor 68, Abu-Lughod 784).

Shakib makes no attempt to address the work of these groups explicitly, however, she does incorporate some of the behaviors/actions of the groups into her narrative. In the section "10. Kapital: Ein Opfer und eine Hochzeit" (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 166), for instance, Shakib presents a group of women gathered under the guise of a wedding celebration. The women capitalize on this opportunity to secretly discuss the current situation of women in Kabul under Taliban rule. Some women are pro-Taliban rule, however, the majority is opposed, and speaks openly and defiantly against the Taliban. Admittedly, Shakib does refrain from creating a group that constitutes any form of automatic unitary group. There is a portrayal, to an extent, of alliances and divisions of

⁷ The Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

class, but not so much in the way of history or sexuality. But what does seem to function as the uniting force within this group echoes of what a number of scholars in the United States have argued in regards to the term "women of color": a common context of struggle and not so much color or racial identification (Mohanty 49).

Feminists from varying disciplines have utilized this type of staging within their narratives. Two examples, the documentaries *Permissible Dreams* (Germany, 1983) and *Hidden Faces* (Britain, 1990), use this space to explore matters concerning patriarchy in their villages. Within the two films, there is an exploration of the issues that accompany the act of women working in concert to create an alternative institution. Even in 1989 Farida Benlyazid's film, *Bab Ila Sma Maftouh (Eine Tür zum Himmel)*, offered a positive glimpse of an "all-female space, counterposing Islamic feminism to Orientalist phantasies" (Shohat 205). What is interesting here, however, is that although Shakib confesses her book is composed of the experiences of many women, there is a lack of any mention of the social and political activist groups of which this scene seems so reminiscent; the reader is taken no further than the immediate discussion. It is very unlikely Shakib or all of her interviewees would have been unaware of the existence of these groups or had no interaction therewith.

Ella Shohat notes "contemporary documentaries show all-female gatherings as a space for resistance to patriarchy and fundamentalism" (Shohat 206). The intention here is neither to deny nor overemphasize the necessity or function of such spaces, in regards to forming strategic political identities and affinities, but rather to insist on careful, historically specific contextualization to complex realities. It appears as though Shakib is suggesting to the reader that no Afghan woman has any power or agency beyond what

amounts to little more than wishful thinking and childish defiance. The topic of female agency will be discussed shortly, but for the matter at hand, these spaces reserved for the segregation of men and women appear to be reduced to what could amount to gossiping "hotspot" or the modern day water cooler, the designated locale for triviality, instead of a hub for resistance, power, and cultural revolution. This could have been a prime opportunity to address an alternative for women's aid in Afghanistan; one that focuses on what women are already doing in Afghanistan as opposed to an approach that acts on the premise of saving these "powerless victims."

Representation Through Imagery

The discussion of the practice of veiling has increased dramatically over the course of the last decade. The overwhelming majority of the discourse argues around the idea of the veil as a "sociological causality...while terms like morality, divinity and virtue are accorded to the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonized" (Mahmood *Politics* 16). Bridging the discussion of constructed space with imagery, we see that Shakib's narrative enters the discussion, speaking to the advantage of the association of the veil with the confinement and inhibition of freedom. In this work, similar to works such as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the veil functions both as a physical and emotional wall which, as Mashael Al-Sudeary declares, is symptomatic of the marginal roles they are purported to play in society (Al-Sudeary 537). The idea by some Western scholars asserts that the veil acts as a thing that controls women by marking them as invisible and disempowered. In one of many sections of the narrative, we see this idea clearly expressed: "Nimm dein *hejab* ab, damit ich dich sehen kann, sagt die Mädchenfrau. Du

bist nicht mehr in Afghanistan, hier kann dich niemand zwingen, dein Gesicht zu bedecken" (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 65).

As is customary, there is no address of the veil's function within Islamic teachings, for its spiritual value, as a garment that "preserve[s] women's sanctity and respect by liberating them from the surveillance of the male gaze" (Al-Sudeary 540-41). This is problematic as religion is at times manipulated, and taken out of the social context of the complex interactions within a society, which constitutes the foundation for many political, economic, and individual behaviors, according to Katherine Bullock (Bullock 139). Although for Shakib, the veil is not presented as an object that inhibits women's ability to think or act for themselves, it is presented as an object of physical suffering.

The veil, more specifically the *burqa*, is described as an insufferable garment. Women must muster the strength to drag themselves about under the sweltering Afghanistan sun and over blistering hot sands in this allegedly restrictive, portable sauna. In instances such as these, the veil has become a visible reminder, a pretext, of everything that is problematic in Afghanistan, in the Eastern world. However, scholars like Fadwa El Guindi have championed that the veil could be seen as a protective space, a veritable safe haven for women, which provides her "sanctity-reserve-respect" without ever blocking or impeding her ability to take control of her own life, or to act as an active subject (El Guindi 83) in a world that has "made women exhibitionistic objects for material consumption" (El Guindi 76).

Power and Resistance

Power, in various forms, plays an essential role in this narrative. Throughout the majority of this work we are presented with the side of Islamic custom that hinges on a

male-centered existence. However, the reality of this male-centered society is also brought into question. We are presented with the Islamic custom, *Pashtunwali*, of the western Pashtun groups, which places the male as the sole provider for the family unit. We see women as supposedly repressed, passive agents in all matters outside of the home; women are therefore restricted or confined to the domestic. However, as Foucault notes, "power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, ...exercising itself only in a negative way. [However if] power is strong this is because...far from preventing knowledge, power produces it" (Foucault 59). However, the narrative questions this assertion of power. It presents a dichotomy between Afghan men where the "good" Afghan man is one who could be somewhat likened to the eastern Pashtun group, adhering to more matriarchal practices. They are presented as "decent," yet weak, passive, or in a state of child-like dependence on their female counter-part. In contrast, the narrative presents the "bad" Afghan man as one likened to the western Pashtuns, who adhere to more patriarchal practices, as evil, filthy, strong and oppressive.

Within the narrative, we are given very few descriptions of the male characters. Perhaps this is due to the second-hand nature of the information, or perhaps this is a technique used to solidify the separation of male and female spaces. Whatever the case, in analyzing the descriptions of the male figures, be they Taliban, Mujahidin or some other faction, the majority of the men are depicted as dirty, smelly, sweaty and threatening. They often spit a discolored substance that is described as having a potentially corrosive characteristic, appearing as though it is able to eat through wooden floors. "Vorbei an spuckenden Männern, an schmierigen Männern mit lüsternen Blicken, Männern mit dicken Bäuchen. Vorbei an Männern, die Grüngelbes ausspucken, die ihre

Schwänze kneten und kratzen, als Shirin-Gol mit ihren Kindern auf dem Schoß an ihnen vorbeifährt" (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 96). Their mouths are typically filled with teeth so unclean they look as if they are golden. "Die ganze Zeit sieht Shirin-Gol nur seinen Goldzahn, riecht seinen fauligen Atem" (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 106). Consequently, Shakib uses the same descriptions in her other works. In her second, bestselling novel, *Samira & Samir* (2005), she writes, "Olfat spits, greenish-yellow, it lies at his feet. Look at him, he says with a stinking laugh" (Shakib *Samira* 72).

These sensationalized depictions of Afghan men seem reminiscent of colonialist descriptions of men of the East, which can be "traced back to a singular textual origin, Marco Polo and Herodotus" (Humble 368; Ashcroft 192). They are dirty, over-sexualized, bellicose, and savage figures; someone from whom the brown woman needs to be protected and the white woman should fear. Young addresses the issue of gender relations as it pertains to the relationship between masculinity and femininity from a feminist studies lens, focusing on the position of male head of household as a protector of the family, and, by extension, with masculine leaders and risk takers as protectors of a population. On one end of the spectrum, she asserts, there is the "bad" man "who wishes to invade the lord's property and sexually conquer his women." On the other end there is the "good" man who "keeps vigilant watch over the safety of his family and readily risks himself in the face of threats from the outside in order to protect the subordinate members of his household." She asserts that "[g]ood men can only appear in their goodness if we assume that lurking outside the warm familial walls are aggressors who wish to attack them" (Young 4).

Young's point is that the protector must be always careful of threats outside the

home. He must be suspicious and ready to fight for his loved ones. If this logic were applied to Shakib's narrative, a disjunct would present itself. The male protectors, the "good" men, in her story are severely deficient. Shirin-Gol's husband, Morad, to whom she was essentially sold in a card game, lacks all traits that would associate him with the protector figure. The narrative, in fact, refers to him as "Opium-Morad" as he is addicted to opium. He is depicted as unable to protect his wife from sexual assault. He becomes disabled when a refrigerator falls on him, thus leaving him unable to provide for his family. He essentially becomes a child, dependent on his wife to procure basic necessities for the family by any means she can. In turn, the protagonist, Shirin-Gol, turns to momentary prostitution in order to earn enough money to feed her family.

During the colonial expansion period, this sort of discourse over the people of the East was presented to white, Europeans. Pamphlets and travel journals described these black "others" as wild, savage, hypersexual, yet possessing a childlike inferiority and ignorance about them. This depiction presented this "other" as something threatening yet controllable. It became the "white man's burden" to take these savages and teach them, that is, to the extent that they could learn. Although the goal of the narrative is to promote a discourse that helps the Afghan woman, it also seems to imply a justification for aiding these women, asserting that the dominant group is either incapable of doing/powerless to do so, or they realize it is contrary to in their best interest to do so -- if they are to remain in control.

Sex and Sexuality

In this final section, we will discuss Shakib's use of sex and sexuality and its connection with female agency within the narrative. Throughout this work, there is a

great deal of emphasis placed on the role of sex in Muslim culture. As discussed previously, with regards to the veil, there has been a great deal of discussion in the Western world about the "male gaze." Throughout the narrative the veil, as a sacred garment or social tool, is constantly in question. It is sometimes depicted as an object of oppression or as a segregated space in constant threat of violation.

The section "2. Kapital: Eine nackte Frau, ein Buchstabe und ein bisschen Freiheit" (Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 30), presents a section in which numerous issues are addressed. In this section, the narrative discusses life in Afghanistan under Soviet control. Life is generally depicted as peaceful and prospering. The implication is that only after the Western world had intervened had life in Afghanistan been able to move towards a modernized and civil state. Women are described as "nackt" (naked), but only in the sense that they are not shielding themselves with some sort of veiling from man's gaze. However, the act of veiling is then put into question. Women and men are depicted on socially equal terms where women are able to question men openly and freely. They are also able to work and move about the city freely, and all children were expected to receive an education as mandated by the new government. The assumption here being that only after there was a break from traditional Afghan customs, could they be able to move into the "civilized" world.

Shirin-Gol glaubt ihren eigenen Augen nicht mehr trauen zu können. Aber sie sieht es klar und deutlich vor sich. Eine Frau, eine afghanische Frau, mit toupiertem Haar und so viel Farbe im Gesicht, als sei sie eine Braut, sitzt ohne Schleier vor ihrem Vater. Die Haut und das Fleisch ihrer Arme, Beine, ihres Halses sind nackt und für jedermann zu sehen. Sie senkt nicht

den Blick, sieht Shirin-Gols Vater dreist in die Augen, spricht ihn direkt an, dass man ihre Zähne und ihre Zunge sehen kann und stellt ihm tausendundeine Fragen, die sie nichts angehen. Und dann...[d]ie Nacktfrau erhebt sich, streckt ihre Hand aus, blickt dem Vater in die Augen, hält ihre Hand so lange ausgestreckt in der Luft, bis der Vater seinerseits die Hand ausstreckt und tatsächlich die Fingerspitzen der Nacktfrau kurz berührt.

(Shakib *Nach Afghanistan* 32-33)

What is interesting here is the lack of any commentary in regards to the new rules set by the government. Similar to the situation in France, after the *burqa* and other full-body coverings were banned, one could assume that women would have been of varying opinions regarding the new veiling regulations. The only voice we hear in response to this is that of Shirin-Gol as a child. In this instance, her mother, whom she spends the majority of life with at this point, is silenced on the matter. Similar to how Weber notes that Kelek questions why the migrant women does not speak up for herself while simultaneously ignoring the voices of "minor" activist groups, I assert Shakib claims to be writing in order to have the women of Afghanistan's voices be heard, yet she silences them within her narrative.

In the narrative, sex is used in a limited number of ways. It is used as a means of procreation; it is used as a means of power as an assertion of agency from an active female subject; it is used as a form of power in terms of punishment. Within the narrative, however, sex is more often than not, depicted in terms of violence. For instance, Shakib offers a rather graphic description of a gang rape enacted by a group of Pakistani police officers. Unfortunately, rape has been and continues to be a serious problem. The

intention is not to belittle its significance or effects. The assertion here, however, is that in instances such as this, there is a resurgence of the depiction of the "strong" black man as being savage, over sexualized, and dangerous. Only through sex, and in this instance of extreme violence, are the male figures in the narrative able to reclaim their dominance. However, this power is fleeting.

After such instances, these figures are returned to the periphery, and life continues unchanged, in squalor and destitution. There is no real power granted them for change. Moreover, as previously discussed with regards to prostitution, in order to provide food for her children, Shirin-Gol is forced to exchange sexual favors with the leader of a band of smugglers, the *Schmuggleranführer*. Again, the "strong" man, the man with power and means, is presented as a figure of lustful desire. He is less savage than the others, yet equally as carnal and primal, presenting this sexually aggressive demeanor as inherent in these men. However, in this manner, the narrative refuses to consider the possibility that the protagonist is able to assert her authority in order to provide for her family. The narrative here presumes that the protagonist has lost her agency, thus becoming a victim. This is a very Western perspective on a very complex and multi-faceted set of issues.

It could be argued that by engaging in this action, the protagonist is asserting her agency as she does what she feels she must in order to support her family. Unfortunately, the depiction of her mental and emotional state immediately preceding the encounter would suggest otherwise. This is a perfectly acceptable response. However, the problem exists in the fact that, again, this narrative is an account of one particular subject presented as one that assumes to speak on behalf of an entire group; all women in Afghanistan.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Women's Oppression as a Global Phenomenon

The Western assumption that women are a homogeneously, "oppressed" group or category lies at the root of the argument against "women's oppression." The discourse between the "oppression" of Western women and Third World or Eastern women is, historically, vastly different. It is possible to consider them in the same context, but such an exercise must be undertaken with extreme caution. In discussing the Third World women as an "oppressed" group, they are (re-)colonized, and numerous locations, social classes, and ethnicities are blended into one indistinguishable mass; each is robbed of her own history and political agency, and defined as subjects outside of social relations (Mohanty 39-40).

According to Mohanty, the Third World woman group, who is in essence the Western "oppressed woman," with the feature of a paternalistic spin added, is "necessarily defined as religious (read: not progressive), family-oriented (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their rights [sic])⁸, illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward), and sometimes revolutionary (read: their country is in a state of war, they must fight!) (Mohanty 40), as opposed to the white, Western woman (read: progressive/modern) (Mohanty 48).

Alternative Solutions: Devictimizing Women

If we are to make any progress in the areas of understanding either the Third World woman or their engagements with feminism, we must have a view that paints a

⁸ (read: they are still not conscious of their rights)

clear, dynamic, and historically specific depiction, as opposed to a captured snapshot of a spectacle long since past. Abu-Lughod suggests that if we are to ever change or reimagine our perception of the East, at least two initial actions that must happen; first, we must learn to disassociate the practice of veiling (and the veil itself) with women's "unfreedom." Second, we must not use a single article of clothing to reduce millions of Muslim women's varied attitudes, situations, and experiences into one (Abu-Lughod 786). As Saba Mahmood notes, "[t]he desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject" (Mahmood "Feminist Theory" 223).

These notion that equate the donning of the *burqa* (or any other form of veiled covering) with oppression, as just one of many possible examples, needs to be altered if we are to move towards a global community that accepts and respects difference, as opposed to advancing and widening the division that already exists between East and West, "them" and "us," "victim" and "savior." Let us begin by realizing that some women may choose to cover for, as Al-Sudeary articulates, "a feeling of 'serenity' at being able to observe traditions and religious practices" (Al-Sudeary 545).

In order to move away from this idea of "saving the brown woman," and move in a direction more in line with opening a space that allows us to engage in a discussion that questions what contributions we may make to positively join in her fight for equality, we must always strive to remember that governments are not always synonymous with the people under their control. The Taliban does not equate to all Afghans. Being ever cognizant that it is both dangerous and erroneous to polarize and view history

simplistically, especially in terms of the relation between Islam and the West, will help resolve the all-too-often habit of creating the cultural divide that shrieks, "You are either WITH us, or you are AGAINST us!" Indeed, it may become possible to find a compromise or alternative between the different histories and cultures.

In addition to the notion of "saving," we need to also move away from the idea of the voiceless subaltern. It is from this mentality that Anglo-American feminists have narrowly constructed a desire to "extract authentic information and testimony from what is perceived to be peripheral" in order to add a humanist take on a political project, without properly recognizing their own participation in historic, neocolonial and colonial misdoings (Kaplan and Grewal 355). With regards to the literary community, Kaplan and Grewal assert that many (Marxist) feminists view all women, from a Eurocentric perspective where the (Western) man is central, as belonging to a unified class with a "homogeneous class consciousness," and where the family is typically seen as the sight of oppression.

Breaking away from this model of thinking is key as it produces two fallacies upon the initial inspection. First, it assumes there is an all encompassing, homogeneous category known as "woman." This Western feminist discourse over the Third World subaltern always assumes an "originary division of power" where relations of power are structured so as to present a unilateral and undifferentiated source of power (often represented as masculine in nature), and a cumulative reaction to that power (typically represented in the "powerless, unified groups", women) (Mohanty 38-39). Secondly, and this has been a reason Third World feminist have begun fighting back, it asserts a type of hegemony that "demonizes non-Western families as more oppressive than their first

world counterparts" (Kaplan and Grewal 351). Yet these divisions persist, and as Kaplan and Grewal note, they further the goal of differentiating professionalized boundaries of theories, disciplines, and canons (Kaplan and Grewal 353). However, these social critiques have consequences that go far beyond their academic manifestations; they enter into the realm of the public spheres.

Cooperation within the social as well as political context is key for progress, with respect to the power/knowledge dichotomy that comprises the foundation for today's visually based society. In regards to veiling, we must realize that "agency is not nullified by the donning of the veil" (Al-Sudeary 535). We must also become cognizant that it (veiling) does not constitute a threat against modern-day Western society, which Al-Sudeary considers to be the Western world's reception. Furthermore, it does not represent a form of control over "women's aggressive sexual nature," or a possible way to avoid dishonoring or threatening the order of the patriarchal society (Al-Sudeary 538). Similarly, we must be sure that the voices of a few, working in conjunction with the dominant discourse, are not simultaneously speaking for and overpowering the voices of minority activists working to create change without reducing the complex relationships between Islam, women, and feminism against gendered violence. We must be able to consider the voices of those women who may identify with Muslim communities.

In essence, what Shakib fails to do in her book, and what we as a global community must continuously strive to do, is learn to address our political-ethical hang-ups in such a manner that we learn how to interact with the cultural "Other." We must understand that Eastern women do suffer from structural violence, while simultaneously becoming politicized about culture, in addition to race and class. We must begin to ask

what role we may have played in the lives of the people in these distant locations. We must work to understand that different ideas of justice exist and that different women will have, and will want to choose, ideas about their future that may be different from those we would want for them.

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