Postcolonial feminist research: Challenges and complexities

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Postcolonial feminist research: challenges and complexities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline the challenges and complexities in conducting research faced by scholars utilizing postcolonial feminist frameworks. The paper discusses postcolonial feminist key concepts, namely representation, subalternity, and reflexivity and the challenges scholars face when deploying these concepts in fieldwork settings. The paper then outlines the implications of these concepts for feminist praxis related to international management theory, research, and writing as well as entrepreneurship programs.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper discusses the experiences of the author in conducting fieldwork on Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs in the USA and Turkey by focusing explicitly on the challenges and complexities postcolonial feminist frameworks bring to ethnography and auto-ethnography.

Findings – The paper suggests that conducting fieldwork guided by postcolonial feminist frameworks faces challenges related to representation inclusive of the author and the participants in the study. It offers subalternity as a relational understanding of subjects in contrast to comparative approaches to the study of business people. The paper also discusses how positionality impacts reflexivity through gender, ethnicity, and class relations.

Originality/value – This paper offers a critical perspective on conducting research related to non-Western subjects by addressing issues arising from feminist and postcolonial intersections. It is a valuable contribution to those researchers who are interested in conducting feminist research particularly with non-Western people and cultures.

Keywords Postcolonial, Feminism, Subaltern, Reflexive, Non-Western, Entrepreneurs, Cross-cultural research

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

In this paper, I discuss my experiences in conducting fieldwork guided by postcolonial feminist concerns around representation, subalternity, and reflexivity to speak about the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class in conducting fieldwork on Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs in the US and in Turkey. As a Turkish/Turkish-American woman scholar located institutionally within a US business school, I address how various identities formed discursively through these intersections and discuss the implications of these identities for power and positionality in the field, in textual representations, and in “giving voice” (i.e. subaltern agency). Notably, as conditions of globalization (understood here as political, sociocultural, and technological changes taking place within the context of linked national economies) necessitate and enable the movement of people, how can (and should) feminist researchers theorize and examine West/Rest[1] or North/South

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relations amidst the complicated relationship between feminisms and globalization (Desai, 2007)? Given the variety of extant feminist theories and calls for activism available from these theoretically diverse positions (Ackerly and True, 2010) in the context of globalization, what kinds of possibilities are there for theorizing and “writing differently” (Grey and Sinclair, 2006). To this end, I rely on fieldwork findings and experiences to address challenges and complexities related to representation, subalternity, and reflexivity when deploying a postcolonial feminist approach to research. While I recognize these three ideas and practices are interrelated, my approach is to discuss them individually to demonstrate their distinct aspects and contributions to research. Following this, I discuss how these concepts, and the challenges that come with them, provide new directions for scholars who pursue postcolonial feminist praxis in relation to international management theory, research, and writing as well as international entrepreneurship.

2. Postcolonial and feminist intersections

I locate this paper at the intersections of postcolonial critiques on “Western” representations of the “Rest” and feminist concerns over gender, race, ethnicity, and class (among other) relations. These intersectional concerns have already been voiced by postcolonial feminist scholars (Spivak, 1985, 1990, 1996, 1999; Min-ha, 1989; Patai, 1991; Mohanty, 1991, 2003a, b; Narayan, 1997, 2000; Grewal, 2006) who have critiqued epistemological assumptions of Western feminist approaches in their attempts to speak about and speak for the “Third World woman” as an undifferentiated object/subject of Western academia. Postcolonial feminist positions offer re-examination of Western feminist theories in terms of their epistemological assumptions as such theories have been produced based on positions of power and privilege in the West (Mohanty, 1991; Calás and Smircich, 1996, 2006). To this end, I conceptualize postcolonial feminist positions as simultaneous critique and recovery strategies in the examination of (Western) representations and material conditions facing postcolonial subjects within the historic context of West/Rest relations ongoing through contemporary globalization processes.

As Lewis and Mills (2003, p. 20) suggest, this lens signals an awareness of “situatedness” and brings to visibility the ways in which “identities and political positions are worked out within the postcolonial context”. In this sense, postcolonial feminist approaches, through their different analyzes, bring to visibility the diversity of postcolonial subjects’ experiences and material conditions under which they live. In a fieldwork setting, these approaches necessitate that researchers acknowledge how differences in position and privilege, which may take place through gender, ethnicity, and class among other relations, impact research as well as the researcher-researcher relation (McCorkel and Myers, 2003). Consequently, positionality can be seen as the different positions one occupies in the field (England, 1994) which constantly shift and influence how and which narratives are and can be produced.

While acknowledging positionality is necessary to a feminist research project, it is not sufficient for a postcolonial feminist project. Such a project, which aims to highlight marginalized experiences and subject positions and let individuals “speak for themselves” necessarily, has to critique representations of Third World subjects in Western theories and texts and engage with the notion of the “native”. Yet such critique is not undertaken with the aim of producing more “authentic” representations
or correcting “misrepresentations” of subjects. Rather, such critique aims to show how West/Rest are relational concepts and studying encounters among West and the “Rest” requires feminist researchers adopt a reflexive stance in producing theory as well as in conducting fieldwork (Visweswaran, 1997). From this perspective, representations are not and should not be the products of “information retrieval” from the “Third World” on display in Western journals. Postcolonial feminist positions highlight problematic assumptions over the conceptualization of the research subject (i.e. Woman or women) in West/Rest relations as well as question what constitutes ethico-reflexive praxis (Aggarwal, 2000; Sato, 2004).

Moreover, these positions complicate notions of who can speak for whom, as they require acknowledgement of the messy intersections of subaltern agency and researcher reflexivity. In doing so, they complicate further the “situated” epistemology approach (Haraway, 1988) by addressing the positionality of the researcher and the subaltern subject (Khan, 2005) as relevant to research. The subaltern subject, as I conceptualize it in this paper, is based on Spivak’s engagement with the concept. For Spivak, the subaltern exist outside global capitalist processes and do not have the agency to speak for themselves; but she reclaims this same notion of “the subaltern” as a space to interrupt and question dominant subject positions and, through it, problematizes attempts to represent the gendered division of global labor under conditions of globalization (Spivak, 1988). As such, I rely on the subaltern as a subject position rather than necessarily an actual person or group of people (see Loomba, 1993). This conceptual difference is necessary in order to be able to see how different people may occupy the same subaltern position and to understand the possibility for a “collective subjectivity of agents” (Loomba, 1993). Thus, addressing subalternity as part of the research process requires scholars uncover how subaltern subject positions are produced and examine possibilities for agency and change. Consequently, subalternity allows for a material analysis of socio-cultural, political and economic processes that produce conditions of subordination and oppression.

My aim in this paper is to discuss how the complex theoretical aspects of postcolonial feminist positions impact research focused on “Third World” subjects. Thus, how do concerns over representation, subalternity, and reflexivity translate into actions for conducting research? To address this question, I discuss a research project that examines identity formation narratives by Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs in the US and in Turkey. This project serves as an exemplar to demonstrate the challenges and complexities of carrying out postcolonial feminist research.

3. **Postcolonial feminist research project: Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs**

With respect to representation, one broad aim of the research is to challenge existing approaches to representing non-Western people based on Western notions of selfhood. In line with postcolonial feminist aims of critiquing hegemonic forms of knowledge and producing “autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 51), one specific aim is to produce locally grounded identity narratives based on shifting gender, ethnicity, and class relations between myself and research subjects (i.e. positionality) in the US and in Turkey. As such, engaging with representation in this project is a two-fold process that simultaneously aims to dismantle and construct identities.
While the US and Turkey do not have a historic colonial relationship, postcolonial feminist lenses are useful for challenging dominant US-based business discourses that replicate the Western notion of self in representations of Turkish subjects. In addition, as I will elucidate, these lenses highlight how Western business discourses colonize local work-life ideas and practices deployed by Turkish high-technology women entrepreneurs as they struggle against patriarchy and limited economic opportunities. My observations lead to questions as to whether these women’s strategies for dealing with these challenges constitute local feminist practices. These questions are relevant in light of the fact that feminist calls for action on behalf of “Women” have been based on experiences and worldviews emanating from positions of “whiteness” and privilege in the West (Mohanty, 2003a; Calás and Smircich, 2006). Can these privileged positions in the West, and the actions they want to embark upon for “Women”, see Turkish women entrepreneurs as more than oppressed and in need of help?

To this end, subalternity complicates the notion that patriarchy and lack of economic opportunity are problems facing Turkish women entrepreneurs rather than local manifestations and experiences of global capitalism. As I demonstrate, Turkish is a Third World cultural explanation for gendered global capitalist processes that impact women entrepreneurs in the US just as much, albeit differently through differences in race, class, ethnicity, education, etc. Following this, I discuss reflexivity in the field: how analyzes and discussions are based on my own positionality in the field, produced through shifting gender, ethnicity, and class relations, and its intersections with subaltern agency. Finally, I address the implications of postcolonial feminist praxis for international management theory, research, and writing as well as its implications for entrepreneurship programs aimed at “Third World women”.

4. Representation: critique and recovery
One of the main tenets of postcolonial feminist positions is their consistent critique of representations of Third World subjects. Thus, addressing representations from postcolonial feminist perspectives has two aspects that need to be considered in tandem during a research project:

(1) the epistemology of critique; and
(2) the methodology through which recovery might be possible.

In this sense, research relevant to representational critique and recovery will take place in a research field. However, the research field is not “out there” waiting for scholars nor is it necessarily a group of people, a space or a place. In feminist research, the field is defined in terms of “specific political objectives that cut across time and place” such that its “social, political and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts” (Nast, 1994, pp. 57, 60). Moreover, the constitution of the field occurs through a variety of practices, such as discursive and spatial, that are embedded in power relations (Katz, 1994). From a postcolonial feminist perspective, identifying and examining discursive practices that produce a particular field (i.e. representations of Third World subjects in certain Western texts) are necessarily one part of the fieldwork. This first step is particularly relevant for connecting epistemological concerns arising out of postcolonial feminist approaches to the second step or the research methodology and methods that will be deployed during the
research process. In this section, I examine these two steps in producing critique and recovery related to representation.

4.1 Locating epistemological critique
The first step in relation to the research project I discuss in this paper, which focuses on representations of Turkish entrepreneurial business people, is locating the epistemological critique around how to represent such “Third World” subjects. Within the business literature, one particularly relevant area where such representations are commonplace is under the rubric of “international” management research (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2008). Thus, the field that I examine as part of this research project necessarily includes this set of business literature as the location for critique. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, one important focus of US-based and Western international management (IM) scholarship, cross-cultural and comparative IM in particular, is to outline how to think about people from and in different parts of the world who engage in international business transactions. A pressing issue is how to conceptualize such “global business people” within international management theory and research: How can and should cross-cultural and comparative international management scholars represent the people they want to study (Boyacgiller et al., 2004; Earley and Singh, 2000).

A postcolonial research agenda highlights the lack of debate over the theoretical frameworks guiding IM research and their epistemological assumptions particularly in representations of non-Western business practices, cultures, and people (A. Prasad, 2003; Jack et al., 2008). Moreover, local gender, ethnicity, and class relations may produce novel concepts and practices related to understanding identity and entrepreneurship activities. These concepts and practices may be rendered invisible and marginalized by the very IM theories that aim to “see” and value them and by feminist approaches that assume gender, ethnicity, and class relations in Third World settings exist in the same form as those in the West.

In the specific case of Turkey, hegemonic IM concepts and approaches still guide much of the cross-cultural management research even when authored by Turkish scholars (i.e. Robert and Wasti, 2002; Bayazit, 2003; Erdem et al., 2003; Kusku and Zarkada-Fraser, 2004; Karabati and Say, 2005). Similarly, research undertaken to study entrepreneurs in Turkey also relies on concepts emanating from Western psychology such as motivation (Benzing et al., 2009), needs achievement (Kozan et al., 2006) and orientation (Yetim and Yetim, 2006). Research on women entrepreneurs in Turkey is quite limited and existing approaches examine work-life conflicts women face between their roles as spouse and mother and as entrepreneur (Ozgen and Ufuk, 2000; Ufuk and Ozgen, 2001a, b). Rather than offering an extensive critique of these literatures, my aim here is to demonstrate how and why these literatures are relevant vis à vis postcolonial feminist critique and the relation of this critique to the recovery project.

4.2 Critique of international management literature
Postcolonial critique highlights the underlying assumptions that guide this research, namely modernist assumptions regarding self-emanating from Western psychology. Such a critique outlines the limits of using Western psychology’s notion of “self” as the basis for conceptualizing all entrepreneurs when different concepts of self and identity may exist in non-Western cultures. To this end, the IM literature I focus on through the
critique deploys this very Western self to “see” and study Turkish business people and entrepreneurs. In addition, the researcher’s position as a “native” informant/Turk does not guarantee that Western management theories and concepts will not be deployed to study Turkey and represent Turkish entrepreneurs. Thus, Turkish scholars do not produce “authentic” accounts of Turkish business people and activities by virtue of their citizenship or ethnicity. The critique focuses on the epistemological assumptions guiding theories that purport to be “international” approaches to studying business people rather than a critique of who uses them. To this end, postcolonial feminist positions critique and redirect notions of “native”, “authenticity”, and “international”. This is particularly relevant when “international” management research is defined as “many authors who are international scholars, many samples collected outside North America, and/or many topics related to international or cross-cultural management” (Kirkman and Law, 2005, p. 7). I address this point later in the paper to address the possibilities for praxis.

In sum, the ideas I present above demonstrate the complexities inherent to postcolonial feminist engagement with representation. These complexities include how to define the research field and locate the critique, and how to choose which epistemological assumptions to examine. Despite these complexities, there is more that is necessary to produce a postcolonial feminist research project, which aims at critique and recovery. One way to approach recovery is to conduct fieldwork in order to “see” representation through grounded postcolonial feminist concerns and strategies (Mohanty, 1991). Next, I describe the challenges of conducting postcolonial feminist ethnography and supplement the theoretical discussion with examples from my own research experience.

4.3 Postcolonial feminist methodology and methods
In feminist research practice, methods chosen are based on and guided by epistemological positions and research aims (see Haraway, 1988). This is accomplished through methodology or theorizing which methods would best accomplish the research project in terms of theoretical commitments, feminist praxis, and activist goals (Nast, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 2007). In feminist research, the researcher herself is never ‘outside’ the research process or separated from the research subjects as ‘objective’ observer (Harding, 1993). From a postcolonial perspective, studying representation (i.e. identity formation) discursively requires an explicit focus on language and text. Postcolonial feminist positions problematize how “the researcher”, the actual writing of the research and the audience for whom it is written, are implicated in the very research process (Patai, 1991; Lal, 1996; Khan, 2005). In effect, postcolonial feminist methodological considerations are twofold: recognition of the constructivist critical epistemology guiding the research and addressing questions over “informing” in speaking for others and of particular places (Appadurai, 1988; Katz, 1994).

For my project, these considerations in addition to concerns over representation require me to pay attention to language and text in order to uncover how identity formation happens while being reflexive. To accomplish this simultaneous approach, I rely on a combination of ethnography and auto-ethnography to engage in in-depth fieldwork (i.e. participant observations, interviews, and collection of artifacts). However, ethnography is not without its feminist critics. In light of the close relationships that form through ethnographic approaches, there is greater potential for
exploiting research subjects through collaborative approaches that feminist researchers strive to achieve (Stacey, 1988; Kirsch, 2005; Huisman, 2008). Even more recent reflexive and critical ethnographic approaches (see Clifford, 1992) still position the White Western male as the voice of ethnographic authority without regard to the ways privilege is reproduced through research (Borland, 2007).

Postcoloniality challenges and complicates ethnographic approaches further in that it recognizes the complicity of Western anthropologists in enabling colonial rule (P. Prasad, 2003) and the hegemonic and universalizing notion of culture (see Sokefeld, 1999) which ethnography embodies. As such, postcolonial feminist approaches to ethnography highlight that systems of inequality can remain unchallenged when First World scholars research Third World women (Patai, 1991) and demonstrate that reciprocity and collaboration under conditions of power asymmetries are not necessarily possible. Ultimately, postcolonial feminist positions voice the limits of ethnographic approaches by (re)conceptualizing the ethnographer’s positionality in the field through the intersections of epistemological concerns, ethical practices, and political commitments in relation to Third World subjects.

To this end, I discuss how subalternity and the formation of subaltern subject positions complicate the already complex ethnographic considerations that postcolonial feminist position necessitates. Specifically, the next section focuses on my attempts to uncover/recover marginalized concepts of self. It also acknowledges the challenges subalternity poses for producing an ethnographic account related to whose voice would represent that of the marginalized and how to think about differences between subjects beyond a comparative approach. Ultimately, subalternity provides insights for understanding gendered global capitalist processes through interconnections and linkages between people, places, and practices (see Bhavnani, 2007).

5. Subalternity: the problematic intersections of voice and agency

To demonstrate how subalternity complicates comparative approaches to the study of women high-technology entrepreneurs, I rely on two interviews conducted with women entrepreneurs in Turkey. Based on these narratives, I discuss “woman high-technology entrepreneur” as a subaltern position and outline how this relational collective subjectivity is produced through local and global processes. I propose that this collective subjectivity is possible and desirable for purposes of change. However, postcolonial feminist positions complicate “seeing” agency: which practices constitute a challenge and resistance to hegemonic discourses and material processes?

During my interview with Zeynep[2], a Turkish woman, she discusses how a “male work culture” intrudes her family life:

Speaking about work at dinner, working on Saturday, Sunday, these things are very prevalent now, “let’s go get a couple of drinks and let’s talk a little business”, I can’t do this because I have children waiting for me at home. When someone says dinner, I get goosebumps. I want to spend my weekend with my children. I end up working from 8:30 in the morning to 7:30 at night and then I want to spend the rest of my time with my children. In one sense, I’m limited by time and I really don’t want that, but because of that you end up not being able to work in a style men are accustomed to. What I mean is, you are not able to become part of that style.
In this case, Zeynep discusses how norms associated with doing business in high-technology emerge as norms based on the schedules of men, who are not primary caregivers. In contrast, Semra, a Turkish-American woman in Turkey, discusses how dinners offer “more intimate, more friendlier environment” and “that’s very conducive of doing business”. Zeynep’s cognizance of gender as a lens to explain her experiences and critique business norms stands in stark contrast to the gender-neutral explanations of Semra, who states bluntly that being a woman has “not been an issue [or] obstacle in raising money, or managing my company, or finding people to work for me, people trusting that I would be able to close a second round”.

5.1 Subalternity to “see” differently

One way to analyze these narratives is through a comparative approach: examine different gender norms and roles in business and entrepreneurship in the US and in Turkey through ethnography. Such a project could note limited opportunities for entrepreneurship activities in Turkey due to bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of stable social, financial, and economic policies (Cetindamar, 2002). Within this context, women’s participation in the Turkish labor market is 23.5 percent, with 36.9 percent of these jobs concentrated in the agricultural sector (Ince, 2010). In addition, women employed in non-agricultural sectors do not occupy high, decision-making positions and traditional socio-cultural and conservative religious attitudes still prevail towards women (Ince, 2010). As such, patriarchy, conservatism, and gender oppression and segregation can be legitimate explanations for Zeynep’s experiences as a Turkish woman entrepreneur. From a (liberal) feminist perspective, such “inequality” would necessitate calls for actions on behalf of Turkish women entrepreneurs while an IM interpretation would conceptualize these as “cultural differences” without necessarily any calls to address the situation.

Rather than calling the above account and its interpretations “inaccurate”, I suggest that both feminist and IM approaches conceptualize gender inequality through separation and culture. That is, they ignore the production of this inequality through gendered capitalist processes (see Calás et al., 2010) while adopting a Turkish or cultural explanation for it. A cultural comparison approach to study high-technology women entrepreneurs cannot address global interconnections and dependencies, which produce inequality in the first place. A (liberal) feminist approach may call for action on behalf of women “over there” (i.e. Turkey) without considering women “over here” who are not in positions of power and privilege or the connections between “over there” and “over here”. To clarify, differences among women entrepreneurs in the US, based on race, ethnicity, class, education, etc., impact funding and support for enterprises “over here”. Yet to uncover these sets of experiences in a historically grounded way and to elucidate their globally relational aspects, postcolonial feminist approach to ethnography necessitates “homework” alongside “fieldwork” (Visweswaran, 1994; Aggarwal, 2000). Consequently, from a postcolonial feminist perspective, Zeynep and Semra, both occupy a subaltern position in relation to high-technology entrepreneurship within the context of gendered global capitalist processes. With this relational approach in mind, my analysis focuses on the connections between text and material in the production of a subaltern subject position: woman high-technology entrepreneur.
5.2 Producing a subaltern subject position

Over the past two decades, many developing nations, including Turkey, instituted structural adjustment policies (SAP) dictated by the IMF with the aim of eradicating poverty and health problems, and modernizing their national institutions and infrastructures. More recently, financial and economic globalization processes pressure nations, including industrialized, transition and developing ones, to compete with each other through wages and labor. Specific regions and nations compete globally as sites for manufacturing and service jobs in hopes of promoting economic development with decision and actions undertaken in one region/nation relationally impacting those in another (Yeung, 2009). In the high-technology sector, competition among companies with aims of producing innovative products and making profits has produced globally distributed production networks. Within these networks, low-wage, Third World women workers occupy most manufacturing jobs, low-wage Third World men and women occupy service jobs (i.e. call centers) and high-paid highly educated men in Western nations occupy jobs related to producing innovation (McKay, 2006; Ong, 2006). These historic and ongoing gendered global capitalist processes, particularly in the high-technology sector, impact how and which women can participate in labor markets as high-technology entrepreneurs.

To this end, “woman high-technology entrepreneur” is a subaltern subject position produced through discourses, practices, and processes taking place in the local and global space. Consequently, both Zeynep and Semra occupy this position as they exemplify a “collective subjectivity of agents” (Loomba, 1993). Such a collective approach can work towards challenging a high-technology global production system oppressive to both women and men, most notably in the Third World but also in the West. Yet postcolonial feminist positions complicate “giving voice” and agency. Despite shared subjectivity, local discourses and practices limits what kinds of agency each woman has to challenge and resist gendered norms and practices in the high-technology sector.

5.3 Limits of collective subjectivity: having agency or not?

Semra suggests that being a woman was not an issue or an obstacle for entrepreneurship; echoing US-based management ideas of “what difference does gender make” (see Calás and Smircich, 2006). In effect, she articulates gender as sex difference and goes to suggest there was no difference. Yet her narrative works to dismantle this very notion. She recounts being asked to step aside from the CEO position for her lack of business knowledge, specifically an MBA, and interviewing many men for the job. Semra states:

We ended up finding a guy CEO for the company, and unfortunately he didn’t do very well… I gave him my office, my chair, my pay, my everything and I stepped aside a little bit, but at the end of the day, he didn’t do too well either. I thought, “Well, maybe if they kept me on board, maybe I could have done a better job”.

In contrast, Zeynep recognizes gendered interactions in high-technology through her everyday experiences as she suggests:

My salesperson and I went to a sale, and he’s a man and I’m a woman. I go to the sale with the title of General Manager but because the salesperson is a man, the boss only speaks to him and doesn’t speak to you, it’s been so many years and you’ve accomplished so much in that
time but because of your gender, it’s possible that they prefer your employee over you. This is reality. I can’t deny this at the end, I think it’s important to have a man when you go on a sale because they communicate much better among themselves, they communicate much better than me for sure! So that’s the situation, that’s unfortunately the situation in Turkey, a woman’s place is at home. I mean it’s like that everywhere in the world.

Zeynep also resists bringing work home or working during the weekend as these are gendered practices produced by men: she does not feel that she has a choice and thus attempts to create and maintain a boundary between work and life. In the Turkish context, Zeynep voices how gendered conditions allow a particular kind of high-technology entrepreneurship to emerge while Semra, as the voice of the masculine West, sees high-technology as a gender-neutral activity that can take place at work or at home.

Despite these observations, postcolonial feminist positions do not necessarily offer answers as to whether agency exists. For example, does Zeynep’s recognition of and resistance towards gendered practices and assumptions around work and family signify agency even if at times she replicates them in order to practice entrepreneurship? Or, does Semra have agency to challenge gendered work norms if she does not acknowledge them but still describes them in her narratives? The experiences of Zeynep and Semra “speak back” to representations and assumptions, which speak for and about women under Islam, as necessarily oppressed (Kandiyoti, 1991). As such, postcolonial feminist fieldwork contributes to conversations around what feminism may look like in “other” parts of the world (Visweswaran, 1997) rather than offer authoritative ethnographic accounts of Third World subjects’ local practices as non-feminist. In the next section, I address this exact point on authority through a discussion on reflexivity during research.

6. Reflexivity: casting doubt on authority and “self”

Reflexivity, with its different conceptualizations, is part and parcel of feminist ethnography particularly in relation to analyzing and writing research (see Pillow and Mayo, 2007). Yet postcolonial feminist positions complicate further feminist ethnography and reflexivity. From these perspectives, the researcher is not an information retriever for the Western academic institution that she may be linked to, nor necessarily a “native” who “goes back home” to where she came from, expecting to fit “back in.” Under these conditions, “the native speaker” can no longer speak as a native. These positions raise specific concerns over voice and place and speak directly to their problematic intersections in fieldwork settings, where participants are embedded in power relations (Khan, 2005; Lal, 1996; Sato, 2004). Postcolonial feminist positions raise concerns over “for whom do “we” produce knowledge?” and “what are the consequences of such claims of knowledge?” These concerns distinguish postcolonial fieldwork as a political project beyond a critical approach to qualitative inquiry.

In light of these points, I occupy a subject position parallel to and in interaction with that of the other participants and need to adopt a reflexive stance. For this reason, I take further recourse through auto-ethnography (Buzard, 2003, p. 61) and ethnonarrative (Hansen, 2006) approaches, both of which refer to a reflexive practice of considering the researcher as part of the context both materially and textually. These methods recognize the intersections of researcher’s voice, place, and privilege
that need to be considered in encounters with participants (i.e. observations, interviews) and in the writing of the research (i.e. informing, reporting). They allow me to consider what I pay attention to and how I pay attention to it in terms of what becomes called data (Denzin and Giardina, 2008). Relying on these approaches, I describe how field encounters produce different identities and positionalities for me and for participants, and the challenges I face in light of these positions.

6.1 Entering and staying in the field
For the purposes of my project, the physical research field consists of various individuals and sites that I conceptualize as relevant to my critique and recovery project vis-à-vis Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs. Yet choosing the field is not only an epistemological task but also a political one relevant for reflexivity from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Guided by these ideas, I “entered the field” by attending high-technology business conferences in the Silicon Valley area and a similar conference in Antalya, Turkey. The conferences in Silicon Valley were organized by a Turkish American business organization in Santa Clara, California. I contacted this organization via e-mail to describe my research interests and they forwarded me the names of three Turkish high-technology entrepreneurs who wanted to participate in the research project.

These initial contacts in addition to attending high-technology conferences in Silicon Valley from 2005 to 2007 throughout the course of the research allowed me to become part of the Turkish business community over the several years of data collection. Over time, I became a participant observer in the research as I was asked to give advice about topics for conferences. Based on my contacts in Silicon Valley, I learned about and attended a similar conference focusing on the Turkish high-technology sector in January 2008 in Antalya. In total, I interviewed 13 male and two female Turkish and Turkish-American high-technology entrepreneurs in the US and in Turkey from 2005 to 2008.

6.2 Reconfiguring the “native” informant: authority, reflexivity and “self”
In this research field, what positions did I occupy? As researcher, I held Turkish citizenship but did this mean I was a “native,” fluent in the “cultural” knowledge of Turkey? I was not “going home” since I was not raised in Turkey but in other nations. In this sense, there was no “sense of return” since I had never lived in Turkey to be able to leave Turkey in the first place. Equally relevant is how I entered the research project based on an affiliation with a Western academic institution that needed a “report back” from the field. Yet, this “reporting back” function is by definition a problematic practice in that it does not recognize what “reporting back” actually does and how it comes about.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, “native”, “home”, “going back”, and “reporting back” are all contested terms (Narayan, 1997). For instance, there were no “natives” waiting to be interviewed (Chow, 1994) when I arrived in Silicon Valley or in Turkey. Rather, both I and the other participants were mobile: we produced multiple identities during the course of the fieldwork that crossed geographic, national, and imaginary boundaries to account for our experiences of globalization. These multiple narratives of self changed dependent on place: in Turkey, my family affiliations, dress (i.e. no headscarf), and socioeconomic status marked me as part of the secular elite
class. This is noteworthy in that who I was perceived to be in Turkey affected my encounters with entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley as well as in Turkey.

I experienced the research as a gendered body and, as such, various boundaries emerged around me and about me, inscribing me into particular discourses of self. That is, depending on the encounter, I was seen through multiple lenses and thus could say I had multiple selves throughout the course of the fieldwork. Yet there is more to reflexivity than an analysis of the researcher and her positionality: postcolonial feminist interventions into reflexivity necessitate consideration of subaltern agency. With this in mind, I discuss how gender, ethnicity, and class relations produced particular identities and positionalities in the field and formed me to reconsider possibilities for subaltern agency.

6.3 Positionality and agency: intersections of gender, ethnicity and class

In regards to gender relations, my interpretation of a dinner invitation from a male Turkish entrepreneur in Silicon Valley was to see myself treated as a sexed object. I rejected this position, as I wanted to be seen as a “professional” rather than a gendered-body. As a result of this experience, I did not contact this entrepreneur for an interview again. In doing so, I replicated the very gendered assumptions of Western management discourse Semra had deployed to narrate her experiences as a woman entrepreneur: gender makes no difference. My concern then became how I could or should (re)interpret my earlier analysis of Semra as having no agency when I had used the same “gender makes no difference” assumptions to position myself as a professional in the research field. It is these complex intersections of reflexivity as a problem of subaltern agency that differentiate postcolonial feminist positions from feminist approaches to research.

Yet, this gendered self/identity was not the only one that emerged out of my interactions. In Turkey, I struggled to present myself as ethnically “Turkish” as my cadence, choice of words, and appearance (i.e. fair skin and green eyes) marked me as something other than “Turkish”. In my encounters with cab drivers, administrative assistants, and entrepreneurs, I was asked whether I was really Turkish or a foreigner (i.e. Russian). Problematically, Russian women in Turkey are often associated with sex work and seen as undoing “traditional” Turkish family values by “luring” Turkish men. Thus, being identified as not-Turkish-possibly-Russian had consequences for whether or not I was treated with respect and seen as a researcher. During these encounters, I had to accomplish “Turkishness” and to do so, discussed political offices held by my grandfather in order to suggest that my family has always “been here”. I felt compelled to produce an “authentic Turkish woman” identity when this position reproduces the very notions of authenticity under critique in my project. Moreover, I carried out similar actions to Zeynep in my critique and replication of gendered norms: both of us relying on men to legitimate our positions as entrepreneur or as a native researcher respectively. Can I afford myself agency while suggesting that perhaps she does not have it?

This gendered and ethnic position was not the only identity that emerged during the course of storytelling about entrepreneurship. A class identity also emerged during encounters in Silicon Valley as class, being part of the “secular elite” in this case, was one way for entrepreneurs to claim to be “equal” to me in Turkey. This is expressed in the following ways:
Interviewee: I had an interesting conversation with our ambassador in, in Washington, D.C. the other day, he said you’ve figured out everything but you’ve failed to figure out the green card issue, get your green card!

Interviewer: Well my grandfather knows the consul general.

Interviewee: Everybody knows him.

Interviewer: We also know the “fahri konsolos” [honorary consul general] in Baltimore, he’s a family friend.

Interviewee: good.

The interviewee dismantles each attempt I make to forge a class identity, based on political affiliations, equal to his during this first interview. Throughout the course of the fieldwork as I continued my interviews with him and attended conferences that he helped put together, my encounters with this interviewee were what I call positional achievements. At each encounter, he was in a position to grant or deny me access to the conferences that were vital to the study and thus, I had to constantly accomplish a position with him in order to continue with the fieldwork. In light of this, I am not sure that had I any choice or agency in this relationship in terms of the position I occupied insofar as “I needed to get access”. As a reflexive researcher, I was constantly trying to “give voice” (albeit problematically) to the Turkish high-technology entrepreneur but during encounters such as these, I was the one who needed a voice.

As such, the intersections of reflexivity and subaltern agency complicate notions of “giving voice”: who could “speak back” and from which position? Did “speaking back” accomplish any changes in gender, ethnicity, or class relations such that hegemonic discourses and structures could be dismantled? These complex questions arising out of postcolonial feminist fieldwork provide challenges for feminist researchers but they also provide new directions and opportunities for IM theory, research, and writing and have practical implications for entrepreneurship programs.

7. Conclusions and implications
Relying on key postcolonial feminist interventions with representation, subalternity, and reflexivity, I demonstrate the challenges and complexities that researchers may face during the research process using examples from fieldwork focused in international management and entrepreneurship. These interventions also have implications for feminist praxis. For this specific project, I conceptualize postcolonial feminist praxis as redirecting IM theory, research, and writing and discuss how this can be achieved in this section. In the next section, I discuss practical and social implications related to feminist concerns over what should be done with research, such as democratization, political activism, and social transformation and the sites for action, such as classrooms, publications, and universities (Staeheli and Lawson, 1994).

In terms of redirecting theory, the relational epistemologies of postcolonial feminist positions reconfigure comparative and relativist approaches to IM. As a consequence, IM subjects are conceptualized on relational terms that acknowledge how West/Rest relations are “constituted and constitutive” of each other at the level of identity formation under globalization (Banerjee et al., 2009). These positions highlight contradictions and complexities in how identities form rather than offer a historic
cultural comparisons (i.e. Turkish versus American). Based on my experiences, these comparisons were at times what mainstream journal editors and reviewers wanted to see in articles despite claims to be open to alternative and inclusive approaches. In fact, the problem was that the very notions of “alternative” and “inclusive” were still theorized based on Western liberal humanist ideas without regards to their meta-theoretical assumptions. Such calls for being inclusive are predicated on the assumption that novel approaches still needed to be recognizable to the audience reading it: a form of academic mimicry (Bhabha, 1990, 1994).

Moreover, research guided by postcolonial feminist frameworks utilizes discursive and material analyzes to address “questions of parity and justice when women and other relate worldwide” (Calás and Smircich, 2009). These frameworks require a reflexive praxis that recognizes the connections between research and feminist activism in order to challenge gendered capitalist processes and complicate our understanding of how subjectivities form in West/Rest relations. Ultimately, postcolonial feminist approaches offer engagement with multiple gender, ethnicity, class, etc., relations as part of a research agenda aimed at critique, recovery, and activism.

This approach is particularly relevant for writing as there is no debate over the role of the researcher in the very production of IM knowledge or a reflexive stance on what constitutes IM knowledge (see Jack and Westwood, 2006). As such, postcolonial feminist writing challenges notions of what constitutes “international” management knowledge when such knowledge is already based on assumptions of doing research “over there” (i.e. outside North America). Postcolonial feminist positions critique of such “fieldwork” combined with concerns over the constitution of Third World subjects with regard to “native” informants requires management scholars to reconsider IM knowledge through the intersections of reflexivity and subaltern agency.

In sum, postcolonial feminist frameworks underscore how theory, research, and writing are political engagements. These frameworks reconfigure both feminist perspectives and IM approaches to conceptualizing and representing Third World people: being a researcher interested in inclusion and equality requires an ethical commitment to decolonizing our ways of seeing, doing, and writing (Jaya, 2001).

7.1 Practical and social implications
Returning to my earlier point regarding different feminisms and their extant calls for activism (Ackerly and True, 2010), what are the practical and social implications of postcolonial feminist work? While there are many that can be considered, one approach to activism is to employ research findings to address the various challenges women face in different parts of the world. For this purpose, my project demonstrates that researchers need to be mindful of what constitutes “help” for women entrepreneurs in Turkey by understanding the local struggles and strategies of such women in the context of a global economic system. In line with postcolonial feminist position, this approach constitutes historically and culturally grounded feminist activism in a particular context (Mohanty, 1991, 2003a).

In light of this, women entrepreneurs in Turkey may not necessarily benefit from government or non-profit programs that promote women-owned businesses through loans, start-up funds, or mentoring. While this approach may make sense for some women entrepreneurs in the US or other contexts, postcolonial feminist praxis
necessitates reconsideration of economic development programs that are often heralded as helping women in transition and “developing” nations (Calás et al., 2009). Scholars who aim to produce knowledge with the aim of social transformation need to examine reflexively their own assumptions and authority. They may potentially perpetuate conditions of inequality by making recommendations that are not necessarily appropriate for the people and contexts they study.

Notes
1. While the term “West” is contested particularly through postcolonial feminist positions particularly in terms of its social construction, historical location and geographic ambiguity, I use it to depict a series of ongoing relations between and among different people and places in the world based on colonial histories and contemporary globalization processes. The West/ Rest concept has also been discussed as North/ South, First/ Third world and One-third/ Two-thirds arguments in order to highlight different postcolonial histories, conditions and experiences.
2. All names have been changed to keep individuals anonymous.

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Further reading


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