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Researching The Muslim Diaspora: Towards Developing New Approaches of Reading

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Abstract

This paper discusses the current postgraduate level research into the corpus of Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics which reflects the increasing interests into the corpus by students from within and outside the country. The first research focuses on minority Muslim women writers who reside in different host countries: Standing Alone by Indian American, Asra Q. Nomani, We are a Muslim, Please by Pakistani British, Zaiiba Malik and The Land of Invisible Strangers by Pakistani British, Qanta A. Ahmed. In these narratives, the Muslim women’s selves often face competing binary discourses of Islam and the West/Orientalism. The second research is on three Iranian diasporic memoirs – Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran, Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis and Marina Nemat’s Prisoner of Tehran. The study explores how these memoirists play the role of a native informer for imperialism by presenting Iranian Muslims as the Other while presenting discourses that MXVWLIWKHµZDURQWHUURU¶XQGHUWKHJXLVHRZRPHQ¶VULJKWV7KH ILQDOVWXG\H[SORUHVKRZ resistance and nature appear to coexist throughout the twenty-six years of the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish’s diasporic writing life. The study synthesizes Darwish’s modes of colonialist resistance and in doing so, forge an eco-resistance conceptual framework as a lens for reading resistance in Muslim diasporic writers’ works. The range of researches showcased here illustrates the diversity of issues vis-a-vis the representations of Muslims in diasporic fiction in the West. Each conceptual framework developed towards examining the individual research corpus, as shown in these theses-in-progress, establishes new approaches of reading, elicited from the contexts of the situations that give rise to the production of the texts under scrutiny.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents three on-going studies at the postgraduate level by three doctoral candidates in the area of Muslim diaspora. Each research is guided by a specific narrative and context from which the author outlines a particular theme. This paper discusses the conceptual framework of each study and illustrates the significance of the current research on the Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at the National University of Malaysia.

2. From Conflict To Transformation And Healing: A Reading of Selected Muslim Women’s self-Narratives

The first study focuses on three selected self-narratives by minority Muslim women writers of various descents who are currently residing in different host countries: Standing Alone by Indian American, Asra Q. Nomani, We are a Muslim, Please by Pakistani British, Zaiba Malik and In the Land of Invisible Strangers by Pakistani British, Qanta A. Ahmed. The texts selected are based on their unique portrayals of the spiritual/moral struggles and life challenges faced by minority Muslim women positioned in multiple contexts. In these narratives, one of the distinctive features of Muslim women’s self-narratives is the marked pattern of multiple critique, a term coined by Miriam Cooke (2001). Cooke explains that this oppositional stance represents the way Muslim women criticize gender discrimination within their own culture and the Islamic faith, while at the same time maintaining a critical stand against western feminism for their inherent stereotypes of Islam as oppressive, and that Islam, Muslim women and their everyday practices are monolithic.

It is through the very practice of understanding multiple critique and specifically how each individual Muslim woman constructs meanings and evaluates life values in relations to her own self and others that we are able to arrive at a more enlightened understanding “of how social reality is itself constructed” (Harrison 2009: xxxii). Essentially, in this study, the self is reconceptualised as being constructed within discourse and historical contexts, and not outside of them. Thus, in the exploration of these selected Muslim women’s narratives, the Muslim women protagonists are repositioned in multi-sites. In oscillating between different expected or demanded practices that reveal the relational self and the self as process that embody multilayered identities, roles and values, these selected Muslim women characters actively and continuously challenge the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman’s Self.

The constant dilemma also supports what Gullestad (1996) has outlined as the moral struggles that the Disenchanted Self has to face in challenging and reconciling competing value concepts. In dealing with the confusing arrays of contradictions, dilemmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities posed by both the self and others, the self struggles for a meeting point of reconciliation, not in terms of either/or, or neither/nor, but in terms of integration of these highly contested value concepts. It is within this struggle that the ‘third space’, or creative imaginary site, is invoked. The third space, conceived within the premise of this study, is a creative imaginary known as the ‘Spaces of Hope’ (Phillips, 2009), which represent spaces where characters confront, deconstruct and reconstruct conflicting issues of concern. In traversing these points of divergence and convergence, these Muslim women often experience and demonstrate binary discordance/concordance (adapted from Ricoeur
In view of this, how do we then, locate and relate the struggle of the Muslim women’s selves in reasserting their agency as they navigate and strive to reconcile escalating emotional turmoil? One vantage point is to locate the self within the Islamic Paradigm of *hablum minallah* and *hablum minas* where the self is both relational and a process. Within this paradigm, the self is relational because it is deemed as intertwined with God and others. Moreover, in this paradigm, the self is also conceived as a process because it bears the responsibility of being a *khilafah*, a responsible and accountable self that is continuously in a state of flux. This self as process struggles with everyday conflicts. It continuously and creatively searches for ways to reinvent itself towards betterment in its relationship with God and others, and other aspects of life. It is within this spectrum, the engagement of self as a process towards betterment, that agency is affected.

Critically, the binary discordance/concordance is revealed throughout the two stages—the Stage of Conflict and the Stage of Transformation and Healing. During the first stage or point of Conflict, most of the events experienced are ‘nameless’ or come across as surreal. Broadly, it can be said that these overwhelming experiences or encounters with the sources of conflict take multiple forms. One, they can be shocking and overemphasized, like in the case of Ahmed’s first encounter with the real Saudi Muslims where the sight of the men praying in public made her question her own inner faith, while the veil comes to life and play hideous roles in replacing or erasing the existence of Saudi Muslim women. Second, they can also be an array of disjointed occurrences that cause confusion and silence, like in the case of Malik’s discordant/concordant reactions for feeling that she has failed to rise to the occasion of both her fellow Pakistanis and the white, British others. Third, they can be feelings of discontentment, disenchantment and niggling doubts that lead to a sense of displacement. For instance in Nomani’s memoir, she seems uncomfortable dealing with the familiar, Islamic cultural practices of her Muslim others. Regardless whether these events are real or imagined or are taken superficially or distortedly, the experiences and encounters affect these disporic Muslim women writers, and as the study hypothesizes, may present the reader with an insight into the true conflicts experienced by them. In the Stage of Transformation and Healing, issues concerning personal and societal transformation are chief concerns of the study into Muslim self-narratives. The study investigates the extent these Muslim authors/narrators strive to make sense of the paradoxical nature of their selves and social realities.

In conclusion, throughout the research into these selected narratives, the central concern is with the relational location of the self and the process it undergoes towards spiritual/emotional/psychological transformation and healing. How far are these Muslim women engaged in various forms of agency in reconciling their multiplicity of selves and identities? What is the outcome of these Muslim women’s struggles against private/public conflicts and how do these conflicts create a sense of awareness of the Other? These questions form the basis of the investigation into the selected Muslim self-narratives using the above presented conceptual framework.

3. Neo-Colonialism as an Imperialistic Project: A Critique of Three Iranian Diasporic Memoirs

The second study focuses on the Iranian diasporic memoirs. To an increasing number of critics, writings by immigrant Iranian women, particularly the memoir, “[constitute] a pernicious outcome of contemporary military campaigns in the Middle East: a restaging of Orientalist and imperialist ideologies by a cadre of native informers” (Darznik 2007: 1). These native informers are at the service of the empire by presenting a sketchy depiction of Iran, particularly its women as oppressed, which conforms to the Western Orientlist discourses, and
then putting their works at the disposal of imperialist to create justification for its project of hegemony disguised as ‘war on terror’ or the project of saving women, which Spivak (1988: 297) describes as the project of “white men saving brown women from brown men”. In a broader sense, the native informers’ representations, as Pillai (2010) argues, are all constructions of decidedly essentialist discourses of their native country, which serves as an imperialist project.

For the last few decades, the Iranian women memoirists in exile for the last few decades have been creating a literature engaged with what have become the most suitable topics of the day: immigration, exile, religious fundamentalism and women’s rights. Critics who praised the authenticity of the texts failed to consider the fact that these life narratives can be easily co-opted as a propaganda. According to Akhavan, Bashi, Kia and Shakharsi (2007), these memoirs presented as life narratives can be forgeries that are created in order to achieve political aims of the West because at a time when the neo-colonial and imperialist projects desire to build a case for a military attack against Iran, these memoirs are complicit with these projects.

Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003), Satrapi’s Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (2003) and Nemat’s Prisoner of Tehran (2007) are the three Iranian diasporic memoirs that are chosen for this research as they are aligned thematically by the theme of veiling, Islam and Iranians. The concepts that are applied for the framework of analysis are Dabashi’s ‘native informer’, Whitlock’s ‘soft weapon’, Fanon’s ‘mental assimilation’ and ‘inferiority complex’, Bhabha’s ‘stereotypical representation’, and Sardar’s ‘postmodernism.’ The two main theoretical concepts in this study are Dabashi’s (2006, 2011) ‘native informer’ and Whitlock’s (2007) ‘soft weapons.’ Firstly, Dabashi’s (2006, 2011) concepts of ‘native informer’ and ‘comprador intellectuals’ are used to exhibit that the selected memoirists pave the way for imperialist military intervention under the justification of human rights. Secondly, to support Dabashi’s theories, Whitlock’s (2007) notion of ‘soft weapons’ is utilized in this study as it reveals how the memoirs are co-opted into a propaganda that serves imperialist goals by giving a false account of their life. Thirdly, Fanon’s (1952, 2008) concepts of mental assimilation and inferiority complex are significant concepts to this study as they disclose that the selected native writers have assimilated the form and culture of the West in their discourses, and they present the idea that the West is superior than the East. Fourthly, to further bolster the main theoretical concepts, Bhabha’s (1994) concept of stereotypical representation is used to discuss the fact that the selected memoirists appropriate the image of the nation that was already structured by previous Western discourses to reinforce the dichotomy of West/East. Finally, Sardar’s (1998) concepts of postmodernism as a neo-colonial agenda and his four principles are utilized to prove that the memoirs reflect some principles of postmodernism; and that they are also constructive in showing that the writers present exotic elements to the West as an agenda of neo-colonialism which will highlight their position as a native informer.

These texts are combined with a staged position of marginality and difference, and work to whet the Western reader’s appetite for an authoritative account of what women experience in the Islamic regime. The marginality and difference is staged explicitly at the outset of these memoirs and is a cliché that conjures empathy from the Western reader, who can also imagine herself as an outsider in a Muslim society. It is shown that the memoirists’ acts of dissimilarity from Iranians and similarity with the Westerners have supported the legacy of empire; superiority over the inferior ‘other’, that was a core of European colonial projects and which continues to be a feature of empire-building myth of America. The native informers who provide the stories and put it at the service of imperialism know the expectations of the Western audience; that is why the genuine-sounding accounts were constructed. The authenticity is attributed to them not only because of their nativity but also because there had been several well-known individuals who confirmed the reliability of the texts. The highly personal memoirs of these writers are replete with distortions of facts and generalizations of Muslims. The fact that they write selectively highlights their position as ‘comprador intellectual’ and ‘native informer.’ What
accentuates their role as native informer can also be found in the memoirs’ topicality and time of publishing which can prove the idea that they have written their narratives for the Westerners to convince them that it was time to save women from the brutality and aggression of men in an Islamic regime and therefore, justifying an imperialist’s intervention. It is also shown that selective writings and different marketing strategies of the native informers’ memoirs are employed by the West to develop hegemony.

4. Ecoresistance in Mahmoud Darwish’s Diasporic Writing

The third research within the corpus of Muslim diaspora showcased in this paper is the study of Mahmoud Darwish’s resistance poetry. Resistance and nature appear to coexist throughout the twenty-six years of the Palestinian poet’s diasporic writing life. Though Darwish was exiled from Palestine, his poetic voice of resistance gained momentum even from a distance. By utilizing nature as a form of defiance to the occupation of his homeland, Darwish’s poems are intimately connected to Palestine from which he was displaced. Frangieb (2008) asserts that Darwish has indeed played a leading role in his political commitment to Arab national causes and in enriching the modern Arab poetics as a whole. With the emergence of Darwish and his extensive writing over a span of fifty years, an immeasurably rich voice of resistance was added to the Arab world in general and to Palestine in particular. As Rahman (2008:41) remarks, “as a poet of exile, Darwish’s poetry has long been preoccupied with a reflection on homeland”. In this context, the current study is intended to provide fresh insights into the modes of Darwish’s colonial resistance from a distance via nature in his homeland.

Internal displacement colours Darwish’s youth and subsequently his creative works. Hadidi (2008: 108) remarks that along with more than 750,000 other internally displaced Palestinians who lost homes, possessions and wealth, Darwish experienced the harshness of the military occupation rule from 1948 onwards until he was forced to leave again in 1970. He lived outside Palestine for twenty-six years during which his resistance poetry burgeoned noticeably. Writing from within one’s country and outside of it in Darwish’s circumstance of being displaced and expelled requires further scrutiny. By paying attention to this period of Darwish’s life, this study sets out to demonstrate the ways in which he utilizes the images of nature to show more keenly the loss of home and the need to resist, even from a distance.

The study synthesizes Darwish’s modes of colonialist resistance and in doing so, forges an eco-resistance conceptual framework as a lens for reading resistance in Muslim diasporic writers’ works. It is derived from both the postcolonial and the ecocritical theories of reading literature. Since the core idea of the present study is resisting colonialism through nature, colonialism, resistance, and Palestine will be the indicators of the framework. Colonialism of the designed ‘ecoresistance framework’ is used in the context of this work to refer to the Israeli territorial acquisition and control of Palestinian land and people from 1948 upwards. Therefore, the setting of the research is the colonized Palestine whose people and land have been struggling against the occupiers of their homeland since the very first moment of the occupation. Such resistance takes two forms – human resistance and resistance through the forms of nature.

Postcolonial theory, in general, grew out of the discontent of colonial ways of reading the natives, and as a response to ways of reading works that were produced in the aftermath of colonial rule. The current study makes a link between the marginality of nature in postcolonial theorizing and the centrism of nature in ecocriticism. This study takes up among others Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s (1996: xviii) definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between the world of humans and the natural world. It has evolved out of many traditional approaches to literature and it is interdisciplinary in nature. The literary works are viewed in terms of place. In addition, the study utilizes relevant aspects of postcolonial theory that grew out of the dissatisfaction over
colonial ways of reading the natives, and as a response to ways of reading works that were produced in the aftermath of colonial rule. For that purpose, Cudjoe’s (1980) and Harlow’s (1987) constructions of resistance are of significance for the current study. The combination of the two theories forms the current conceptual framework of eco-resistance. Firstly, through the merging of anthropocentric views of postcolonialists and ecocentric views of ecocritics; secondly, by creating an interconnection between the question of identity in postcolonial studies and the perception of land in ecocritical theory; and finally, with the linking of marginality of nature in postcolonial theorizing and the centrisms of nature in ecocriticism. The blending of the two theories has resulted in bringing out three major concepts, namely, centrist, interconnectedness and forms of nature. These are the three conceptual pillars of the proposed ecoresistance framework that will be used to analyze Darwish’s selected poems of resistance.

The first phase focuses on the early poems of the first twelve years of his writing life; the second covers the poems of the next twenty-six years in exile and the final phase dwells on the poems upon returning home that span the last twelve years of Darwish’s life. Since the poet arrives at the last phase of his resistance in the poems upon returning home, the third phase of the analysis focuses on the aspects of the last phase of Darwish’s resistance through nature in the light of the three concepts used for analysis in the previous two phases. The rationale for the above-mentioned methodology is that each phase has its own context, sequences and consequences according to which the poet’s employment of nature for resistance changes. Analyzing the selected poems of each phase can be of assistance in tracing the different faces and phases of development in Darwish’s employment of nature for resistance throughout his writing life.

Darwish’s poetic voice of resistance through the forms of nature has been intensified during his diasporic life because he has shown, in varying degrees, how he remains linked to his land of birth although he is exiled from it. He remains emotionally and psychologically bound to Palestine even though he is physically estranged from it. His struggle to free his land from the clutches of the regime gains momentum through his employment of nature identified with his land. Like the sun that never sleeps, Darwish is the Palestinian son that could never sever his umbilical cord with his motherland, even though he writes from a distance. By explicating the aspects of ecoresistance in the selected diasporic poems of Darwish, this study sets out to provide a new lens for reading resistance in Muslim diasporic writing and propose fresh insights into man’s connection to land as a strategy to defy colonial rule.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the current postgraduate level research into the corpus of Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics which reflects the increasing interests into the corpus by students from within and outside the country. The range of researches showcased here illustrates the diversity of issues vis-a-vis the representations of Muslims in diasporic works of fiction. The strength of the three studies showcased in the paper lie in the conceptual framework developed within the context of the research corpus and relevant theories. The conceptual framework developed towards examining the individual research corpus, as shown in these theses-in-progress, establish new approaches of reading, elicited from the contexts of the situations that give rise to the production of the texts under scrutiny.

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