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## AERIAL VOICES AND FLUID FIRMAMENTS: CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINIST LITERATURE FROM SOUTH ASIA

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### Abstract

South Asian feminist writers have for long highlighted the organic relationship between women's experiences and histories, whether of nation and nationalism, race, indigeneity, religion, caste or class. A historical overview of women's literature from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka reveals how women's historicity or their politics of location within larger patriarchal metanarratives of History leads to artistic production and shapes their writing. South Asian women writers thus become historiographers who subvert the colonial discourse of History with personal narratives of experience, emotion, memory, trauma, displacement, and empowerment. At a dialogic level, the personal and fictional histories of women's writing from South Asia have crossed boundaries of the province and nation-state in their recognition of the convergence of women's issues from global, trans-national perspectives. The politics of multi-culturalism, terrorism and Islamophobia post 9/11, religious extremism, fundamentalism, and the hyper-textualized image of women from South Asia in the global media are contemporary concerns of immediate relevance for South Asian women of national and diasporic origins. While many writers record painful journeys of political exile, the burden of artistic exile and trauma experienced by women, silenced in their own homeland, calls for equal and urgent attention. South Asian women's experiences in literature underline the intersectionality of issues of gender. This research paper will attempt to chart cartographies of self-expression, resistance, sisterhood and women's collective consciousness through dialogic and inter-sectional approaches to select feminist literatures of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, , and Bhutan.

*Keywords: South Asian Feminist Literatures, history, historiography, exile, intersectionality, dialogic consciousness*

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In their phenomenal work *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari locate the politics of minor literature in the collective, as an assemblage of voices (8). Although written

from the margins, minor writing interestingly subverts the notion of marginality by de-territorializing notions of the center, thereby the fixed essence of subjectivity. South Asian Feminist Literatures foreground such a collective, an assemblage of disparate women's voices which, even as they occupy the recesses of objecthood, question their politics of location as institutionalized subjects of patriarchy within cultural hegemonies such as family, caste, religion, nation, race, and indigeneity.

South Asian women's literatures have a long tradition of contextualizing feminist concerns within larger spatiotemporal politics of history, nation and nationalism, and the post-colonial crisis of tradition versus modernity foisted upon women as markers or bearers of culture. In their attempt to de-segment, de-stratify and dislocate normative constructions of femininity, South Asian women writers highlight the multiplicity and complexity of women's narratives in opposition to the centrality and essentialism of monolithic patriarchal texts and structures.

#### Paradigms for South Asian Feminist Scholarship

The research article is an attempt to highlight three significant approaches to reading feminist literatures in South Asia: Intersectionality, Historiography, and Dialogic Consciousness. It will endeavor to illustrate how feminist consciousness in much of women's writing from South Asia is deeply embedded in, therefore emerges from within the very institutional structures which oppress them inherently. Resistance from within can thus be recognized as integral to the history of feminist consciousness in such writings which call for a differential set of feminist practices in reading and criticism. Most of the South Asian women's literatures are grounded in women's experiences within subjective historicities of cultural materialism. What it implies is that a reader cannot invest feminist consciousness into the text without being aware of the materiality of the cultural texts which structure and signify women's lived experiences in specific ways. Feminist theories based on largely western, epistemological approaches to equality or progressive models of empowerment may thus prove to be inadequate. South Asian feminist writers engage readers, irrespective of their cultural moorings, in specific histories of nation, community, caste, and class and bridge the gap between women's experience and writing while collating feminist theory with contextual readings of women's texts. A reading of Mahasweta Devi (who did not attribute the term 'feminist' to herself or her writing) connects one immediately to women's experiences at the grassroots level, be it within the Adivasi community, the Naxalbari movement, partition, or the caste system. Without an understanding of the hegemonic narratives of caste and indigeneity or the politics of nationalism and state-inflicted violence, one cannot understand a Dopdi or a Jashoda.

## Interlocking Skeins of Experience: The Fabric of Intersectionality in South Asian Women's Literatures

When we undertake a historical survey of women's writings from South Asia, two interesting aspects emerge: the intersectionality of women's concerns and the fact that women's lived experiences constitute the nature of both oppression and resistance in these literatures. When Chandra Talpade Mohanty resisted the essentialism of third world 'woman' and 'women' in western feminist scholarship and insisted upon the need to address women's concerns in terms of heterogeneity and specificity of socio-cultural aspects, in her famous essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", she basically set into motion an approach, which is gaining momentum in contemporary feminist scholarship, namely, intersectionality. The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to highlight the interstices of race and gender among Afro-American women. This was articulated earlier on by bell hooks in her famous remark that race cannot be separated from gender, class, , and history. Situating intersectionality within a long history of black feminist theory focusing on interlocking systems of power and oppression, the article posits: "intersectionality is not an account of personal identity but one of power" (<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com>).

Growing debates in feminism have increasingly highlighted the need to open up a dialogue with the intersectional aspects of oppression to fully comprehend women's concerns. To this end, South Asian feminist literatures are significant spaces which integrate empirical concerns of intersectionality with women's personal narratives of the feminine subject in relation to larger hegemonies. Feminist approaches to South Asian women cannot thus be isolated from caste, class, race, ethnicity and other social markers. Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah", especially the second part, exemplifies the intersectionality of religion, gender and diasporic consciousness among Muslim women. Purdah 1 highlights how Muslim women in orthodox cultures internalize the Purdah:

We sit still, letting the cloth grow  
a little closer to our skin.

A light filters inward  
through our bodies' walls.

Voices speak inside us,  
echoing in the places we have just left.

Purdah , on the other hand, indicates how the Purdah has more symbolic roles beyond its material confines for women:

They have all been sold and bought,  
the girls I knew,  
unwilling virgins who had been taught,  
especially in this strangers' land, to bind

their brightness tightly round,  
whatever they might wear,  
in the purdah of the mind.

Much of the global debates on the *hijab*, post 9/11, problematize the veil while women themselves may wear it as a mark of religion, rather than gender. The benevolent paternalism of the west towards the women of Afghanistan is born out of a similar essentialist understanding that the veil is the material basis for patriarchal oppression of Muslim women. Perceived as bearers or markers of culture, women in diasporic communities have greater pressure to literally embody religion, community, and culture through symbolic markers. In this plethora of significations of the feminine gender, it is indeed important to contextualize South Asian women within historical contexts to comprehend the basis of their oppression, thereby feminist consciousness. Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah" enables intersectional, cross-cultural, contextual readings of the multiple, yet contingent relationships different Muslim women have with the veil. Some of the South Asian feminist writers who have questioned the symbolism of the veil in both traditional Islamic and modern islamophobic societies as well as ideologies of religious fundamentalism, benevolent paternalism and multiculturalism are: Mukhtar Mai and Tehmina Durrani from Pakistan and the British Indian writer, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed.

In her popular collection of short stories, titled *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga rewrites the stories of marginal characters from *The Ramayana* by creating dialogues with *Sita*. *Manthara*, the hunchback; *Soorpanaka* and *Ayumukhi*, the mutilated Dravidian women of *Ravana's* clan; *Ahalya*, the sinful woman who is redeemed finally by *Rama*, are some of the characters who bring to light the true stories behind their oppression, and the fact that grand narratives are always built upon the silencing of marginal narratives. The politics of caste, race, and class are intrinsic to the historical oppression of women, and their stories are mired in myths which glorify dominant discourses of war, nationalism and imperial expansion. Notions of fidelity and chastity, albeit personal, also proclaim the limits placed upon women's bodies. South Asian writings such as those of Volga rewrite the history of women by enabling them to speak through intersectionalities of class, caste, religion, race, ethnicity and across the historical divide, to other women whose voices have also been silenced.

#### From beneath the Cracks of History: South Asian Feminist Literatures as Historiography

While historicity is the subjective experience of History, Historiography is a larger discourse which reads History critically to examine the process whereby History is constituted. The grand narrative of History is thus a process of inclusions and exclusions, pre-determined by forces of hegemony. Feminist Historiography contends that women are left out of History and attempts to reconstruct, rather deconstruct History by retrieving lost or silenced voices from the social space of women's experiences. Memory and emotion thus become important registers for

women's historical experience, especially in historiographic feminist literature. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is a classical example of this genre of writing. Mahasweta Devi exemplifies the interconnectedness of historiography to her writing in the following words: "I have always believed that the real history is made by ordinary people."

Postcolonial narratives of women's historical experience within the politics of nation and nationalism are significant historiographic tropes in South Asian women's literatures. Jean Arasanayagam, Sri Lankan poet and author questions the pre-emptive inclusion of nation as the basis of postcolonial history and the subsequent exclusion of subjects outside dominant discourses of nationalism. As a Burgher of mixed ancestry, Arasanayagam is perceived as neither Dutch nor Sinhalese. Her marriage to a Sri Lankan Tamil adds to the hybridity of her postcolonial identity. Her response to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka troubles the monolithic narrative of History and connects the colonial residue of the memory of violence to the terrible atrocities of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Across History, violence has not changed, and women continue to stand on the brink of History as it feeds upon violence and fattens itself.

Yet whom they destroy?

Those who to each other are unknown

Who know not nor will ever know Each other's histories or personal

Loves and hates, no longer to equate

A child's toy with a human life

As cradles burn

As beds of lovers go up in flames The only ecstasy is the death Bathed in the blood of the murderer

Even the guilty now absolved

Of every sin, become saints.

Whom do we destroy?

Wrenching apart like broken fingers

Fractured bones unclasped from palm,

They go back to their lairs and dens

Piled with loot clothe themselves in

Other skins.

("Apocalypse")

Uma Mahendran's *The Twice Born* and Aneeta Sundararaj's *The Banana Leaf Men* address the history of migration and diasporic consciousness among ethnic minorities in Malaysia. Chuah Guat Eng remarks, "Both works explore problems of social integration and national unity faced by English educated members of an ethnic minority" (<https://www.pressreader.com>). Across the Atlantic, Monica Ali's novels have established themselves for their sensitive portrayal of the concerns of diasporic Bangladeshi women. *Brick*

*Lane*, her most recognized novel, narrates the inner workings of the Bangladeshi community in the UK and the cloistered nature of women's work and its even in the small hamlets of Bangladeshi communities settled abroad. Taslima Nasrin is undoubtedly one of the most vociferous voices questioning both religious fundamentalism and the privileged brand of citizenship accorded to subjects who conform to rigid notions of nationalism. As an artist in exile, Nasrin's voice questions censorship in the face of heterodoxy.

Two contemporary voices from Afghanistan, Lida Abdullah and Zohra Saeed, capture women's violent displacement and multicultural negotiations with diasporic Afghani identity: Standing in the mosque then, I did not know that a couple of years later I would become a refugee. I had lost many things, small things, marking the boundaries of my small universe. But how does one lose a country, from where does it slip one's grip?

(Lida Abdullah, "Kuchis")

To add to the list of many South Asian writers rewriting nation, nationalism and historical consciousness, Manjushree Thapa and Sushma Joshi from Nepal and Kunzang Choden and Dorji Wangmo from Bhutan extend traditional approaches to envisioning South Asian feminism by placing women from their countries on the map of transnational feminisms.

From Discursive to Dialogic Feminist Consciousness: Aerial and Fluid Voices of South Asian Feminist Literatures

To conclude, South Asian feminist literatures embody dialogic consciousness, a framework suggested and employed by Bakhtin to counter dialectic approaches. Women talk back from and write back to History, talk from within and across the intersectionality of hegemonic identities and encourage dialogue to at once recognize and articulate heterogeneity of women's experiences. Dialogic approaches to South Asian feminist literatures can help acknowledge the importance of addressing the collective without dissociating the subjective from historical experience and cultural materialism. As Srila Roy contends in her recent book on South Asian feminisms, there is an urgent need to bridge the "generational divide" among women across history to counter attacks of backlash and post-feminism and strengthen women's movements across South Asia (1). A dialogic approach can thus enable a collective feminist consciousness with reinforced and new founded goals for feminist writers, thinkers, and activists across regional, national and ideological boundaries, an aerial and fluid cartography for women's voices.

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