

Women, Race, Patriarchy: A Transnational Feminist Critique of *Rich Like Us* and *Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Transnational feminism emanates from Postcolonial feminist theories, which emphasize on how colonial aftermath has shaped, molded and is continuing to influence the social, political, economic and psychological oppression of people around the world. It foregrounds its assumptions on the premises that gender subjectivity and suffrage is not alike for every woman living in different regions. Their lived experiences under patriarchal and capitalist powers are different with respect to their race, ethnicity, religion and belief systems prevalent in their societies. The text under discussion here are Thousand Splendid Suns by Khalid Hosseini and Rich Like Us by Nayantara Sehgal, both authors being pioneers in their respective domain. The article seeks to explore the subjectivities and male oppression of women and their activism and subsequent liberation from their misfortunes and reclaiming of their identities. The present papers shows the struggle and activism of these two women with respect to their geographical location and how they reclaim and assert their individuality, one in a foreign land and the other by returning to her homeland as a changed and independent woman who not only emancipates herself but also influences the other women in the oppressive patriarchal order prevalent in her society.

Keywords: Transnational Feminism, Post-Colonial feminism, Gender subjectivities, Patriarchy, Sisterhood, Cross-border migration. Hegemony.

Theorizing Transnational Feminism

The paper seeks to explore the subjectivities and male oppression of women and their activism and subsequent liberation from their misfortunes and reclaiming of their identities. The women in question here are from two different racial and national backgrounds, i.e., the white woman, Rose, from colonial England, and Laila, a modern Afghani teenage girl, fighting against all odds during Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The present papers shows the struggle and activism of these two women with respect to their geographical location and how they reclaim and assert their individuality, one in a foreign land and the other by returning to her homeland as a changed and independent woman who not only emancipates herself but also influences the other women in the oppressive patriarchal order prevalent in her society.

When we talk about *feminism* as a movement now in the post millennial world, we understand that it cannot be applied to women from all ethnic backgrounds, race, colour and variegated patriarchies. The debate about feminism has long been under the prevalent discourse that all women are not same thus making their experiences with the world not being similar either. It largely depends upon the socio-political and economic environments that they are living in and hence they experience different subjectivities at the hands of their male counterparts. So, when we say ‘woman suffrage’, we mean it differently for white, brown or black women. And when we try to bring together their plight and juxtapose it with the plight of other women from around the world, it gives a common ground of them being the victims of their circumstances, largely propagated and influenced by socio-cultural biases and norms. Similarly, the term post-colonial feminism does not represent all the non-white women but specifically women from the once colonized nations. In these terms, the black women too have a representative term, ‘Black Feminism’ to highlight their struggle and movement against patriarchal legacies and the list of such feminisms goes on and on.

The western feminists have long been circumscribing the misfortunes and suffering of non-white women and white women alike. This euro-centric approach to feminism is now being shunned and the focus of third wave feminists/feminism is now toward the categorization of different women and their variegated physical and psychological injustices at the hands of men in their societies. So in order to bring together the different feminism under one roof the term ‘transnational feminism’ has emerged in the recent times. Transnational feminism tries to bring together all the feminisms under one umbrella so as to encompass the experiences, activism and agencies of all the women and understand their multifarious dilemmas in totality.

Transnational feminism is an off-shot of Postcolonial feminist theories, which focus on how colonial aftermath has shaped and molded and is continuing to influence the social, political,

economic and psychological oppression of people around the world. It discards the notion that all the people around the globe encounter similar kinds of injustices and inequalities with respect to gender biases. It foregrounds its assumptions on the premises that gender subjectivity and suffrage is not alike for every woman living in different regions. Their lived experiences under patriarchal and capitalist powers are different with respect to their race, ethnicity, religion and belief systems prevalent in their societies. It rejects the notion of 'global sisterhood' while simultaneously emphasizing for importance of equality among women across the boundaries.

The term 'Transnational Feminism' is "similar to concepts of "women of colour" feminisms (e.g. The Combahee River Collective 1982), "third world" feminisms (e.g. Mohanty et al. 1991), "multi-cultural" feminisms (e.g. Shohat 1998), "international" feminisms (e.g. Enloe 1990), and "global" feminisms (e.g. Morgan 1984). . ."(Swarr and Nagar 3).

Highlighting the constraints of international feminisms and global feminisms, Nagar and Swarr argue:

Whereas international feminisms are seen as rigidly adhering to nation-state borders and playing inadequate attention to forces of globalization, global feminisms have been subjected to critical scrutiny for prioritizing northern feminist agendas and perspectives and for homogenizing women's struggles for sociopolitical justice, especially in colonial and neocolonial contexts (Swarr and Nagar, 2010, 4).

Arguing Transnational Feminism in the context of selected Texts

The present paper is a transnational feminist critique of women characters from three different racial backgrounds, European, Indian, and Afghan, who fight against all odds in the oppressive patriarchal society. The present study cannot be claimed to be a mere feminist study, *per se*, but it would neither be appropriate to affix a common term like international feminist, third world feminist, global feminist or post colonial feminist critique though women in question here differ on the grounds of race and ethnicity. But when we say transnational feminist critique, we can tend to break the monolithic notion that of the third world women as passive recipients of violence and oppression who need a euro-centric feminist discourse which appropriates their sufferings and gives agency to their cry for liberation. Inderpal Grewal and Caran Kaplan's concept of "transnational feminism" is useful in understanding the sufferings and continuous resistance of geographically re/dislocated women character within their families and society at large and their attempt to gain freedom and negotiation of power with the patronizing men. Grewal and Kaplan argue that:

We see post modernism as a critique of modernist agendas as they are manifested in various forms and locations around the world. Our critiques of certain forms of

feminism emerge from their willing participation in modernity with all its colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women (Grewal and Kaplan, 2002, 2).

In the novel *Rich like Us*, we find a transnational movement of the female protagonist, Rose, a white European woman, and her development in a foreign/colonized landscape. Rose gives us a picture of the first world, white, colonial woman who leaves her 'superior' status and enters into a marriage alliance with an already married, brown, colonized Indian male, Ram. The other character, Mona, the first wife of Ram, though does not move physically from one nation border to another, but, she is reduced to a second level by her husband when he marries Rose and brings her home to live with Mona. Mona is represented as a marginalized woman suffering at the hands of her male counterpart as well as, a superior, white woman as her co-wife. Though, as we shall later see, the suffering of Rose are no less irrespective of her being white and belonging to the side of colonizers.

Grewal and Kaplan's concept of transnational feminism gives us an insight into the study of the development of the character of Rose as seen through her transborder movement thereby reflecting on the changes which she undergoes along with the geographical change in location. Rose belonged to a white, lower-middle class family and the luxuries of life haven't ever stepped inside her threshold. She has seen her father working hard and earning just enough for the survival of them all and her mother working rigorously, day in and day out like any other housewives then. She remembers how "her mother's arms elbow-deep in the steam and carbolic soap of the week's washing, hanging clothes to dry on the line outside if there was sun . . ." (Sahgal, 2003, 65). The kind of society which Rose grew up and lived in was no different than the society which she chose by accompanying Ram to India. The lower middle-class women of white, colonial England were no better than the middle class Indian women when it came to gender subjectivity. The position of Rose's mother in England was no better than Mona, Rose's co-wife who shared the similar patriarchal oppression at the hands of their respective husbands. Rose's mother was nothing more than a child-bearer for her husband who continued producing unwanted children. Rose recalls about her mother's state—"tired sex at night . . . hope-against-hope that might abort a pregnancy. Miscarriages were better than nothing, but in the end you were back to full-term deliveries, your bruised and battered body returned, a loose empty sack to fill up again" (66). We see Mona too undergoing the similar ordeal when Ram enters into an extramarital affair with Rose abroad and never even bothers to revert to the hurried telegram which brings him the news of his newborn son back in India. Mona too is here seen as a victim of her husband's sexual gratification without a trace of love or respect for her. His cool and casual tone in telling

about her new born son to Rose affirms the above argument. He says, “He was born last month. My father cabled the news of his birth.” (42).

Rose’s development in a foreign land is prominent after she comes to India. We find Rose searching for meaning and independence in her life and this also leads to her relationships with other women from that foreign land which ultimately shapes her life. The change in geographical location and ethnicity shapes their relationship and develops a mutual understanding which their male counterparts are unable to provide them with. The differences between their economic status, ethnicity and cultural values bring them together and stand for each other under suffocating political conditions and patriarchy. Initially Rose is unhappy being the ‘other woman’ in the life of Ram and Mona and we find her hoping for Mona to be dead one fine day. She fancies, “everything would work out all right if Mona were dead. If only she’d be dead, dead, dead, she had hammered out the thought night after night after night” (106). Mona too asserts her resistance and anger against Rose who she considers as a wicked white woman who has enticed her husband and taken him away from her. The tussle of the two women for the love and attention of one man is explicit initially:

Mona’s protest was far from silent. Calling upon the Almighty to spell out what she had done in this or past lives to deserve such outrageous treatment, she had wept with vigour. Rose, who had not set her eyes on her, only heard her loud, unnerving lamentations. Some nights she got so carried away that Ram, tossing and grumbling in his bed, would finally get up and go down and Mona would reclaim her husband for a few minutes, an hour or a night (62).

Mona is triply- marginalized here because she finds herself being emasculated under firstly, a white woman, who happens to be her co-wife, secondly, by a chauvinist husband who least cares about her rights as a wife and more importantly as an emotional being, and thirdly under the colonized India which is still far from independence. She is a victim of conservative Hindu patriarchal family, which is itself being subject to the colonial rule of British and more so of an *intrusion* by the representative of that imperialist power—Rose, in her own household. But the position of Rose is no where better than Mona except for the fact that she has more financial stability now than what she enjoyed in her home country. Rose works along with Ram in their newly set up business and have perks of socializing with the who’s who of Lahore because Ram is a well-connected man. But Rose finds herself being suffocated in the cultural practices of the nation in which she has moved forever. After she reaches India accompanied with Ram, she finds herself plunging into the deep-rooted patriarchy prevalent in Indian society. Ram marries her with Hindu rituals but she immediately becomes aware of her *forbidden otherness* when Ram’s father angrily says, “Take that woman out of my sight” (45). Ram’s love for female flesh is clearly evident when

he justifies his keeping two wives by supporting his act with a mythical fact, where he tells Rose that, “King Dasratha, Rama’s father, had four wives . . . Muslims can have *only* four, at a time. We are more adventurous, even polyandrous” (63).

But Rose’s realization of her identity and self-awareness comes with her relationship with the other women in the foreign land. These two other women being Mona and Sonali, and with regard to race, geography, culture, and religion, Rose comes to understand her position with respect to women from other cultures and locations. Joan Borsa calls it “politics of location” where she argues that, “those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways, which are as much a part of our psyches as they are a physical or geographical placement” (36). The idea, politics of location, was first articulated by Adrienne Rich in her essay “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”, where she argues that “from the outset body had more than one identity . . . the body I was born into was not only female and white, but Jewish-enough for geographic location to have played . . . a determining part”.

The women in question here, though ethnically and geographically different, but are similar in their experiences in a particular locale. Ram’s voyeurism and his love for women drift him away from his wives, and bring the two women closer to each other. After he falls for another white woman, Marcella, Rose is psychologically and emotionally drawn towards Mona, who is never given agency to claim her location or tell her story. Rose is aware of her ‘otherness’ as a white woman in Dev’s household (as Ram is reduced to a vegetative state and Nishi has no say when it comes to Dev and his decisions regarding the finances) and Rose remains an outsider relying on the petty amount that Dev reimburses for her. Her fight is not only against the oppressive Hindu joint family where women like Mona have no agency and liberty but, it is also a fight against patriarchy running down from one generation to another—i.e. from father to son, which entraps Rose. Her definition of being a woman changes according to her geographical location, social and economic status and ethnicity. She realizes that all women, irrespective of their color and race, undergo some sort of patriarchal oppression, but their experiences are one of their kinds and cannot be categorized as similar. The female identity that she has in England was different to what she assumed after she came and lived in India. She came to explore herself, her identity, to India of her own accord. “It came to her she’d been in the grip of no fate at all. She had been beckoned by curiosity, lured and compelled by mystery, come halfway round the world following the unknown” (281).

The transnational feminist critique of *Thousand Splendid Suns*, attempts to show the encounter of Laila, the victim of oppressive Afghan patriarchal system and equally dominating political state of affairs, and her cross border movement to Pakistan in order to escape the suffocating and brutal rule of Taliban in Afghanistan, only to return back later to

liberate her people from the miseries they were going through. The study of *Thousand Splendid Suns* does not directly give us the transnational feminist critique of a cross border movement of the protagonist Laila to a foreign land and her struggles for survival and recognition over there, rather, it shows how the protagonist found her identity and asserted her freedom in her homeland which tried to alienate her as a foreign, deviant body. Laila's struggle against the political forces working outside, and against her cruel husband inside the household, made her life equally difficult as it was for Rose in a foreign land. Laila grew up in a soviet-ruled Afghanistan which later came under the *Mujahideens* and then the *Talibanis* before the country was finally liberated of their oppressive regime. Thus we see Laila struggling against patriarchy and oppressive political powers operating in her country throughout her life. But it was during the rule of soviet-communists that Laila had the best of her times. Babi, her father once remarked, "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before . . . it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan. And you can take advantage of that, Laila" (Hosseini, 2008, 133). "More freedom" and "more rights" give the readers a clear picture of the restricted amount of freedom with the Afghan women and their fight for identity and survival.

Babi was the source of liberation and hope for Laila as he stood against the centuries-old tradition of especially Pashtun regions of Afghanistan who lived by ancient tribal laws and considered issues of women equality and liberation as an insult to their tradition. But after Babi's death, Laila's only hope for a better future for herself dashed to the ground. The only other pillar of her strength after Babi was Tariq who's sudden departure left Laila crippled and lame. Her marriage of convenience to Rasheed, a man triple her age was the last blow to her dreams of liberation and self recognition. But Laila did not leave hope and her first attempt at liberating herself of Rasheed's oppression was when she crossed the culturally normative boundaries built around the muslim women's sexuality. Rasheed married Laila to use her sexuality and womanhood to carry forward his name through a male heir. But Laila, who carried Tariq's child in her womb, misled Rasheed into believing it to be his child. Her act of defiance came from the fact that she defied the norms of virginity and still managed to save herself and her unborn child from the wrath of Rasheed. On the night of their wedding, after Rasheed made it out with Laila and fell asleep she "quietly reached beneath the mattress for the knife she had hidden there earlier. With it, she punctured the pad of her index finger. Then she lifted the blanket and let her finger bleed on the sheets where they had lain together" (214). Laila broke the stereotype of a naïve, virgin, helpless woman on her wedding night and took the matter of her and her unborn's survival in her hands. She crossed the psychological boundaries of normativity laid down by patriarchy in her country and never felt

any sort of guilt about the whole thing. She wanted her and Tariq's child to come into this world who would remind her of the good old days when she was the happiest. Laila here can be seen as a "Colonized Woman" an important site of contestation for her "Indigenous Colonizing Male" counterpart who tried to possess, overpower, dominate and control her sexuality and legitimize it for his vested interests. Laila challenged, defied and confronted this oppression when she used her sexuality for her own safety and wellbeing.

Laila not only crossed the psychological boundaries of oppression but also tried to liberate Mariam, her co-wife and later on the only companion. She was the one who hatched a plan to escape from the regular torture and beatings received from Rasheed and encouraged the meek and docile Mariam to run away with her to Pakistan along with the children. Crossing the threshold was not less than crossing the border of Afghanistan during that time as the country was under the afflicting and orthodox rule of Taliban. It was the worst of time for every woman then because moving out of threshold without a male accomplice amounted to severe beating and even persecution for women during that time. Laila once again challenged and opposed the patriarchy and took charge of not only her life but that of another woman too. She rebelled against the watchful patriarchal forces operating psychologically as well as physically around them.

Laila's relocating to Pakistan with Tariq and her children was not only transnational move across the borders but also allowed her greater independence when she turned to other geographical location. Though Pakistan does not give her the sort of intellectual, sexual and physical freedom which she yearns for but it acts as a substitute for her suffocating life in Afghanistan. "It is a good life, Laila tells herself, a life to be thankful for. It is, in fact, precisely the sort of life she used to dream for herself in her darkest days with Rasheed" (378). She gets a respite from a life controlled and dominated by an abusive husband, Rasheed. She realizes her dream of living a fulfilling life with her childhood love, Tariq, and her two children. The geographical change brings new avenue of hope for her—a life full of contentment and marital bliss. The absolute control of husband over his wife is similar to the control of colonizer over the colonized and thus the kind of oppression that Laila went through during her stay with Rasheed gave way to domestic patriarchy which was a result of the absolute control of the political forces like Soviets, the Mujahideens and the Talibans later on. The political forces operating in Afghanistan were a substitute for White/western colonizers who domesticated and enslaved the women of Afghanistan by giving complete control of their lives to men folk.

Laila's upbringing and the ideals of Babi, her father, were in contrast to what the new Talibani regime forced on people. Her life was in sharp contrast to how she had lived when her father was alive. She explores her sexuality at a very young age and has very little

apprehension whatsoever after she consummates her love for Tariq. She enjoys more freedom and independence while her father was alive but things turn upside down for her after she loses her family and has to marry a man much older than her who is also a typical patriarch and dislikes even the little freedom which women might enjoy.

Laila's attempt to move from Afghanistan to Pakistan is an effort to have social autonomy and freedom. After Mariam kills Rasheed she convinces Laila to run away to Pakistan with Tariq and her children only to be in Afghanistan and take the repercussion of the murder for which she is shot as per Talibani law. She marries Tariq after reaching Pakistan but marrying Tariq does not simply mean a shift of Laila from one patriarchal head to another, but the geographical change helps her shape her own sense of identity. Her association with Mariam and the sudden departure without Mariam has somewhere left an emotional vacuum inside Laila. The life she is now enjoying is because Mariam has laid down hers to let Laila realize her dreams. In one of the telling scenes:

Laila has her own dreams. In them, she is always back at the house in Kabul, walking the hall, climbing the stairs. She is alone but . . . sometimes she hears a woman's low-pitched humming of an old Herati song. But when he walks in, the room is empty. There is no one there . . . The dream leaves Laila shaken (370).

Laila could never help herself forget what happened with Mariam, Babi and Mammy (Laila's mother) and Tariq back in Afghanistan. Moving away from her home country into a new land and enjoying a life full of freedom and conjugal bliss, did not help Laila forget the traumas her loved ones had once suffered. After she hears from Tariq about the USA declaring a war against Afghanistan and the people being killed there, she gets agitated at the thought and wonders helplessly:

what happened to Babi and Mammy is happening to someone now in Afghanistan, not when some unsuspecting girl or boy back home has just been orphaned by a rocket as she was. Laila cannot bring herself to say it. It's hard to rejoice. It seems hypocritical, perverse (375).

The coalition forces have driven out the Talibans out of all the major cities of Afghanistan and this gives Laila a new hope for a new Afghanistan which she has wanted to live in. She tells Tariq of her decision to move back to their homeland:

A year ago, she would have gladly given an arm to get out of Kabul. But in the last few months, she has found herself missing the city of her childhood . . . but it isn't the homesickness or nostalgia that has Laila thinking of Kabul so much these days. She had become plagued by restlessness. She hears of schools built in Kabul, roads repaved, women returning to work, and her life here, pleasant as it is, grateful as she is for it, seems . . . insufficient to her, inconsequential. Worse yet, wasteful. Of late,

she has started hearing babi's voice in her head. You can be anything you want, Laila, he says. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you (378).

Laila's realization of her dreams comes from the perspective that she receives after moving away from her country to another. The fulfilling life that she enjoys during her short stay in Pakistan strengthens her ties with her native land even strongly. Her defining moment as a strong Afghan Muslim woman comes after she enjoys economic, sexual and social freedom in a foreign land and returns stronger than ever before as Dalia Kandiyoti rightfully argues, "transnational roots frequently causes women to belong nowhere, rather than belonging everywhere" (Tucker, 2008, 94).

The closing of *Thousand Splendid Suns* brings the above argument in full realization. Laila goes back to Afghanistan, though not sure of her future, but she is sure to serve her country and reform her of long suffered oppressive regime of Talibans and other warlords. She does not reject the social codes and cultural values of her country but makes an effort to globalize her country and free its people of the conservative and oppressive ideologies. Rose on the other hand came to a foreign land of her free will and remained there till her death. She fully realizes the customs of the foreign land of which she is a part now but her continuous effort to establish her identity and make the natives accept her existence not as a white woman, but as an inseparable part of their family and customs. The attempt here is to understand how women from third world countries and those from first world come together and share their experiences and dissolve the nation-state boundaries and express resistance towards different patriarchies operating around the world.

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