

Forms of Agency Constructed and Represented among Afghan Women in
Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* from a Spivakian
Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

The representation of Afghan women in Western literature has often depicted as silent, weak, oppressed, and passive, frequently overlooking their courage, resistance, and agency. This study examines the forms of agency constructed among Afghan women in Deborah Rodriguez's novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011). Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence, and strategic essentialism, the study examines how female characters negotiate socio-political, and socio-cultural constraints. The study employs a close textual analysis grounded in Catherine Belsey's theoretical framework. The findings reveal that Afghan women exercise agency through solidarity, mutual support, resilience, self-determination, and identity formation. This suggest that agency is not limited to open resistance but often emerges through everyday actions and personal choices.

Keywords: Afghan women's agency, postcolonial feminism, Spivak's subalternity, strategic essentialism, Western representation

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Introduction

This paper introduces the novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011) by Deborah Rodriguez, with the aim of examining what forms of agency are constructed and presented among Afghan women under socio-cultural restrictions.

Many books and stories represent Afghan women as victims under strict Taliban rule and patriarchy and in need of help (Dupree, 1972, 2012; Seierstad, 2003). However, Deborah Rodriguez's novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011) portrays Afghan women as complex individuals who make choices, show resistance to oppression, and demonstrate agency. This novel is about five women of different backgrounds who come together in a coffee shop in the heart of Kabul. These characters share their stories, help each other, make choices, and resist unfair traditional socio-political norms. Deborah explores the complex real-life experiences of Afghan women in her novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*, portraying characters who show courage, strength, and agency. Her female characters challenge traditional patriarchal norms and strict political structures.

Literature Review

This paper discusses the available literature on the current topic, which inspects the realisation of the agency of Afghan women in the novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*, by Deborah Rodriguez, officially published in 2011. This study aims putting the research into the context of the wider scholarly discourse on postcolonial feminism and briefly defining how other researchers have explored the agency of Afghan women, their representation, and their resistance in a colonial and patriarchal society.

The characteristics of Afghan women have always been western political, cultural, and media discourses (Mitra, 2020). Following the U.S. invasion in 2001, terms such as 'the saving of the Muslim women' were used to justify the role of the West in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) states that this simplistic and harmful storytelling kills the varied life of an Afghan woman and does not treat her as a silent victim but instead proposes to scholars and readers that they should learn to interpret her social roles, religious convictions, and psychological conflicts within her cultural background. Saba Mahmood (2005) in *Politics of Piety* opposes the idea by Western feminists that agency always involves resistance to patriarchy. Her theory explains Afghan women's power and identity through faith, family, and community, not Western liberty. Afghanistan's literature and media often connect Afghan women with the burqa, despotism, and victimisation (Alyafei, 2025). This neo-orientalist visual and literary essentialism presents Afghan women as culturally primitive, according to Nayereh Tohidi (2006). The Western media's "unveiling" has become a symbol of independence, ignoring Afghan modesty and dress (Alyafei, 2025). Edward Said (1978) describes Western Orientalism as viewing the East as inferior, immovable, and in need of control. Western ideology, not Afghan women's voices, has shaped their image.

In Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), Afghan women endure patriarchy and brutality. Nash (2011) and Ahmad (2014) say Mariam and Laila, Hosseini's heroines, balance victimhood with resistance. Scholars like Cooke (2001) and Ali (2015) warn that sympathetic narratives may encourage a Western gaze by translating Afghan experiences into Western terminology.

Although considerable research has examined the portrayal of Afghan women in literature, it mostly focuses only on oppression and representation, showing them as silent victims and suffering difficulties. For example, Ahmed (2014) highlights female suffering in Afghan fiction, while Khalid et al. (2023) analyze post-9/11 representations of Afghan women in Western narratives. Similarly, many scholars have depicted the representations of Afghan

women in novels such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khalid Hosseini, focusing on themes of patriarchy, oppression, and women's resilience within Afghan society (Ahmed et al., 2019; Rahimi, 2018). However, limited attention has been given to *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* by Deborah Rodriguez, particularly from the postcolonial feminist theory.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity has rarely been applied to analyze this novel. Unlike many studies that examine oppression, Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* portrays women who act, demonstrate courage, strength, agency by making choices, and challenge the strict socio-political structures. The current research therefore aims to offer a fresh look at Afghan women's agency within a patriarchal and restrictive society.

Research Question

Following is the research question

What forms of agency are constructed and portrayed among Afghan women in Deborah Rodriguez's *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* in the context of postcolonial feminist theory?

Research Methodology

Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory is used to examine what forms of agency create among Afghan women in *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*. It explores how Rodriguez depicts women as moving subjects who have difficulty in negotiating colonial, patriarchal and cultural authority. The study demonstrates how the voices of Afghan women emerge within and in opposition to representation based on subalternity and essentialism as a strategy.

Data Collection

A qualitative textual analysis employs to examine the forms of agency represented among Afghan women in Deborah Rodriguez's novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* (2011). The novel is itself the primary source of data, while journal articles, scholarly books, critical studies related to postcolonial feminism and Afghan women representation are the secondary source of data.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the theoretical framework is divided into two parts; Spivak's postcolonial feminist theory, provides the main theoretical framework for analyzing subalternity and women's agency, while Catherine Belsey's textual analysis approach serves as the methodological tool for close reading of the novel's narrative language, structure, dialogues, tone, and characterization.

Data Analysis

A systematic analysis was conducted to examine the forms of agency constructed and presented among Afghan women in the selected novel. First, the selected passages related to Afghan women's agency in *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* were analyzed through close reading based on Catherine Belsey's textual analysis approach, focusing on characterization, tone, dialogue, and language. Next, themes of agency, such as strategic agency, relational agency, resilience, and resistance were then identified and interpreted through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist framework.

The findings are discussed in two thematic sections. The first result is the representational paradox, which is based on the idea of epistemic violence, as developed by Spivak (1988), and the ideological subject, as elaborated by Belsey (2005), while the second observation concerns Micro-Resistance and Agency through strategic essentialism as explained by Spivak (1993). This result indicates that the individual opposition carried out by Halajan was based on the principle of accommodation and represented subversion rather than a political confrontation.

Textual Analysis

The analysis presents the discussion and conclusion of a close-reading of *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* by Deborah Rodriguez (2011), applying both the theory of postcolonial feminism (particularly theories of subalternity, epistemic violence, and strategic essentialism) and the ideological approach to textual analysis by Catherine Belsey. The analysis is structured around the forms of agency created among Afghan women in *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul*. The novel underpins all the observations with close textual evidence, which is grounded in the corresponding postcolonial feminist approach and situated within the broader academic discussion through peer-reviewed materials.

The Representational Paradox — Agency as Western Narrative Gift

The biggest result of this discussion is the representational paradox: the structural circumstance that empowers and limits Rodriguez's continued effort to humanize, individualize, and confer agency on the Afghan female characters she writes. This paradox cannot be reduced to the conventional view that Western texts distort non-Western texts. It calls into question the epistemology of knowing, where the agency of the woman in Afghanistan can be objectified in Anglophone literary fiction (Spivak, 1988).

Textual Analysis Yazmina's Positioning

Rodriguez starts the novel with the voice of Yazmina, who is presented to the reader on the first page as an interior and conscious subject. The novel itself begins with a sensual picture of the rural life of Yazmina:

"It was a vibrant blue-skied Afghan morning, the kind that made Yazmina stop to loosen her scarf and tilt her face to the sun. She and her younger sister, Layla, were returning from the well, their calloused feet accustomed to repeated treks on the ancient dirt" (p. 4).

This opening passage makes Yazmina a subject, closely intertwined with her landscape, and places her in a position to experience pleasure sensually. The calluses on the feet from walking on dirt, dating back to ancient times, reflect the material circumstances of rural Afghan womanhood and the history of the civilization. According to Spivak, failure to make a representation of the subaltern is not caused by lack of agency but is caused by structural arrangements that render this agency voiceless within dominant discursive practices. The fact that Rodriguez has made the sensory experience of Yazmina the opening is an effort to open the experience of the subaltern to the Western audience. In terms of language, the word *loosen* and the sentence *'tilt her face to the sun'* create Yazmina as an active subject making conscious physical movements, rather than a passive object of a situation. The grammatical possessive pronouns of her scarf and their calloused feet grammatically foreground property and incarnate experience, which allows the subaltern subject a textual presence, which is a precondition to audibility within dominant discursive practices. Yet immediately after this gesture of inclusion, this gesture becomes ambivalent. Yazmina carries an extra weight that proceeds to explain her susceptibility:

"Her secret, the one she carried in her belly, the one she could hide for only another month or two, flooded her with nausea" (p. 4).

Yazmina and her love to life is vulnerable because of the pregnancy. It is the same thing that is going to destroy her, yet it is also the way of illustrating her love to her old husband, Najam. The position of the female body as the site of oppression and the site of continuation has certain significance. This duality is, in Spivakian terms, the icon of the oppressive male power and at the same time the seed of the future.

The extent of structural vulnerability with which Yazmina makes an economic trade-off is revealed in the subsequent exchange. Her uncle fails to pay off his debts, and therefore, he has to give her over to the traffickers.

"Take my goats! Take my house. But do not take Yazmina. It is as if I am selling her. Would you sell your eyes? Would you sell your heart?" (p. 5).

This text has an analytic value in a variety of ways. To start with, the fact that the uncle uses Yazmina as a metaphor for eyes and heart makes her central in defining the family. Second, the actual composition of the plea shows the patriarchal economy where women are commodities that can be easily exchanged. As Mohanty (1984, p. 337) notes, it is common in feminist scholarship in the West to arrive at the monolithic representations of the Third World woman as chiefly victimized. This is made more difficult by the character of the uncle of Yazmina presented by Rodriguez, who is indeed able to lament the loss of a niece, but as the patriarchal system forces him to comply with it. Rodriguez's rhetorical strategy here is significant: the uncle's plea uses the imperative mood ("Take my goats!") followed by the conditional ("Would you sell your eyes?"), shifting from desperate offering to moral questioning. This grammatical movement from command to interrogative mirrors the uncle's shift from economic powerlessness to ethical assertion, enacting in miniature the tension between material subjugation and moral agency that structures the entire novel.

The reaction of Yazmina towards her abduction can be seen as some sort of agency, but not anti-subordinate agency. She does not just give in when confronted with her captors. Rather, it is a calculated decision on her part:

"Yazmina wanted to fight, to kick and scream and run, but she knew that to resist meant they'd take Layla. So she asked, 'May I get my things? Can I bring a change of clothes?'" (p. 6).

This reading shows Yazmina has not been passive in accepting but calculating, as she sacrifices her resistance in favour of her younger sister. Her request to carry clothes is also an act of normalization, a lone attempt to maintain some dignity, and a tactic of stalling. This is in line with what Sandoval (2000) refers to as the oppositional consciousness, the ability of the marginalized to respond tactically to the fluctuating circumstances of power. At the level of narrative technique, Rodriguez uses free indirect discourse here, blending Yazmina's interiority ("she knew that to resist meant they'd take Layla") with the narrator's reporting ("So she asked"). This technique grants the reader access to Yazmina's reasoning while maintaining narrative authority, a formal structure that embodies the representational paradox: the subaltern's thought is made accessible, but only through the mediating apparatus of Western narrative convention. The depiction of the moment when Yazmina is taken also makes her an even more complicated subject of the exercise of agency, even in the process of being transported:

"Yazmina knew she would never be back, so she squared her shoulders, forced her eyes straight ahead, and sat tall as the old man got into the front seat with the driver" (p. 6).

The speech that talks of squaring shoulders, propelling eyes forward, and sitting tall is the language of self-composition of the body in a deliberate manner. Yazmina is performing with her body as a source of resistance. This does not conflict with the fact that agency need not necessarily be in resistance to domination, as suggested by Mahmood (2005), but can also be in the ability to exist within structures of subordination with dignity.

The realization that Yazmina has of the threat she is facing portrays an advanced knowledge of her surroundings that raises questions about the portrayal of Afghan women as being immature or ignorant. As soon as the black SUV gets to the compound of her uncle, she instantly interprets its meaning.

Yazmina's awareness of the danger that surrounds her reflects a sophisticated understanding of her environment that challenges depictions of Afghan women as naive or uninformed. When the black SUV arrives at her uncle's compound, she immediately reads its significance: *"A car like this brought a warlord or a drug lord. When cars like this had arrived before, girls had gone missing"* (p. 5).

This consciousness is the subject's ability to analyze ideologically, according to Belsey (2005). Yazmina is not a casualty of the circumstances; this is a reader of her personal social environment, who is able to read the signs and understand what can be dangerous. This literacy of danger, as we may call it, is a kind of knowledge that Western forms of feminism have often been unable to recognize as a way of agency (Abu-Lughod, 2002). As soon as Pazloi visits the coffee shop, Yazmina's agency takes on new dimensions. She hides her pregnancy with strategic accuracy, as she knows that her survival is determined by taking care of appearances:

"She smiled and did everything in her power to pretend she was fine" (p. 70).

Wellness is a practice that requires significant emotional and physical effort as an intention to preserve oneself. As postulated in the framework forwarded by Mahmood (2005), such performances are not expressions of false consciousness but the most agentic potentials born out of structures of constraint. Yazmina's smile becomes a survival technique, a tactical use of social performance that helps her preserve her role in the coffeehouse.

Also, Yazmina knows how to show relational agency through her continuous attachment to her absent sister. As the Christmas party at the coffeehouse is going on, she speaks to Layla on the inside:

"Layla, the days go by, but I will find some way to bring you to safety before it is too late" (p. 116). It is a tacit promise, an exercise of agency, completely within the domain of interiority. Yazmina is devoted to Layla, not working out of the mediation or confirmation of the West, but rather on the connection of kinship and love between sisters within the Afghan context. This is the point at which Spivak (1993, p. 3) alludes to the subaltern in the ability to authorize themselves, to make promises, intentions not defined by the dominant discursive structures. Agency is also manifested in Yazmina in her creative and material ambitions. She envisions a time of beauty and self-expression in a passage that shows what is inside her:

Someday, she thought, looking out her window to the rising sun, she would sew in the colors of that sky. A dress in a pale orange. What a sight she would be. With golden bangles on her wrist. And shoes of real leather (p. 49).

The given passage is important since it introduces Yazmina as an individual with aesthetic tendencies, material ambitions, and a perspective on the future. Her conceived dress, bangles, and shoes are not the products of Western consumerism; they are the result of Afghan culture of textile trade and self-decoration. The most effective expression of the creative agency of Yazmina is when the character attempts to produce a homemade garment to Sunny. The work is not a product of Western education but of Yazmina's own artistic tradition:

"I made it myself, Sunnyjan. I made it by hand. For you. Please," she said, holding it out again, shyly. 'Loftan, put it on. I want to see if it fits'" (p. 163).

The present is accompanied by shyness, enhanced by the pressure to wear it by Sunny, thus exposing the complex issues of submission and artistic pride. And when Sunny asks her how she was shown how to make such a dress, Yazmina refers to the accomplishment of her talent outside any Western education or training:

"My madar taught me how to sew a regular dress. But this, I don't know. It is something from my heart, something that Allah has given me. I have only needed someone to sew for" (p. 164).

This text is analytically important in several respects. To start with, maternal training, coupled with a divine gift, helps Yazmina attribute her talent to this form of training rather than to formal training. It locates her creative ability within an Afghan cultural and spiritual system that cannot be reduced to Western terms for what art can and does produce. Second, the statement that I have only needed someone to sew makes it clear that Yazmina's agency has been dormant, only to manifest within the social circumstances in which it could. Kern (2021) argues that although reclaiming creative and spatial agency depends on individual talent, restructuring social structures to support agency requires the presence of marginalized women in each society. Even though the coffeehouse's ownership is Western, to qualify as enabled, the coffeehouse offers such a structure to Yazmina. Another aspect of Yazmina's agency is demonstrated by her preservation of family memory and traditions. During one of the intimate scenes, she reaches for the prayer beads of her sister and reads one of the poems, which her family had taught her:

"She opened the box, took out Layla's prayer beads, carved wood and gold on red string, and kissed them, then cupped them in her hands and whispered the poem of her mother's, 'But it is God's heart, Layla, that makes my love for you forever'" (p. 18).

This recitation activity is a process of preserving culture that exists beyond the scope of the Western knowledge economy. The prayer beads and the mother poem are a document of traditionally Afghan female knowledge and love, which is maintained by the physical means of kissing, cupping and whispering, rather than by the means of literacy. Fivush (2019) is of the opinion that identity and meaning are transmitted intergenerationally through the family narratives. Yazmina reciting a poem of her mother's privately shows a continuity of the matrilineage, which is intimate and culturally important.

The birth scene perhaps presents the best illustration of female solidarity, dangerous, contemptuous, and fearless, is a phrase that needs a thorough linguistic analysis. The adjectives increase the rebellion: dangerous is a recognition of the outside danger, contemptuous is the active disdain of authority, and fearless proclaims psychological autonomy. The development of an objective state (danger) to an emotional state (contempt) to a subjective state (fearlessness) develops the agency of Halajan as being more of a matter of consciousness than material power. As Yazmina's labour progresses, Halajan is the one in charge of the situation, authoritatively using the traditional knowledge of midwifery:

"Halajan went to Yazmina, sat behind her, and held her head against her chest, wiping her sweaty face with her dress. 'It is time'" (p. 207).

The way Halajan takes control of the situation and her composed position during the emergency, as well as her appeal to the years of practice in midwifery, is a type of institutional knowledge that has purely Afghan roots. The gendered space of female authority that Ahmet is not allowed to enter is created through her dismissal of him from the room under the pretext of it being a woman's affair (p. 207). Allman and Burton (2003) assert that the restoration of women's historical practices of knowledge, such as midwifery, is an important aspect of the decolonization of gender history. The puerperal care embodied by Halajan is just such a feminine experience, historically based.

Nevertheless, using Belsey's (2005) analytical grid, it should be noted that Yazmina's transformation during the course of the novel is mostly told through the lens of Western characters. Primarily through Sunny's approval and her ability to serve Western customers, her increased talent and ability at the coffeehouse are confirmed. This establishes the paradox of Yazmina's agency, in that it is confirmed on the thematic level and constrained on the structural level, which forms the representational paradox at the centre of the analysis.

Micro-Resistance and its theoretical limits — Reading Halajan

It is the character of Halajan that offers the agency of Afghan women in the novel, where it is thickest and most theoretically fruitful. She is in one of the most restrictive structural positions for women in the novel, and the older Afghan Muslim widow, Halajan, is also the character whose modes of resistance are the most creative and enduring.

Acts of Defiance: Smoking, Hair, and Secret Love

The Halajan agency formulated is an assembly of micro-resistances, all deliberate breaches of patriarchal norms. The most symbolically charged is her secret smoking. Rodriguez devotes a lot of narrative space to this act:

“She dug into a front pocket and pulled out a box of Marlboros and a purple plastic lighter. She lit up, took a deep breath in, and let it out with intense satisfaction. And it wasn’t just from the nicotine. It was from the act itself, dangerous, contemptuous, and fearless” (p. 29-30).

There are several layers of meaning in this passage. Smoking is an act of Taliban rule-break, acts of feminine decency of Afghan culture. The words that Rodriguez employs, dangerous, contemptuous, and fearless, do not characterise smoking as a reckless behaviour, but rather as a defiant behaviour. Read through Mahmood’s (2005, p. 18) concept of agency, not only does Halajan rebel when she smokes but also a state of being within her limits and likewise a zone of independent being. The narrator directly attributes this act to the political atmosphere of freedom and restraint:

“Out here, Halajan was as close as she’d ever get again, she feared, to freedom” (p. 30).

This is a sentence with a lot of analytical weight. The term freedom is not located somewhere in the abstract world but as a tangible, embodied experience, associated with a specific space, which is a small courtyard behind the cafe. The phrase she feared modifies the statement, and it is reasonable to realise that this is perhaps the only freedom that is provided. Spivak (1988) points out that the structural aspects of subalternity not only repress speech but also curtail the terrain within which selfhood can be performed. Such a marginalized space, the courtyard of Halajan is a place where one can locate resistance. Still, the territory is defined by the patriarchal system that enforces the necessity of resistance.

The piece of private resistance that Halajan has maintained is her hair. Rodriguez tells this as an intentional political decision:

“In a private act of defiance, her own personal statement of freedom, for she knew what would happen if the Taliban again gained control of her beloved people, she’d borrowed Sunny’s scissors and cut off her braids, which were, at the time, long enough to reach her waist” (p. 29).

Haircutting is practiced at various symbolic levels. It is a denial of the visual economy of the Taliban, for whom hair is a source of control and concealment of women. It is a process of reassertion of bodily integrity. And it is a pre-emptive resistance; it serves to strike against the assumption that the Taliban might return. Hooks (2000) also believes that the creation of a space of resistance by marginalized women in the domestic sphere can be termed 'the radical homeplace'. In this place, political consciousness can be developed despite a lack of formal political participation. Halajan also has a six-year-long affair with the correspondence of Rachif, a tailor, in the Mondai-e market.

“She dug into the pocket of her dress and pulled out Rashif’s most recent letter. She admired its lovely penmanship with the flourishes that surprised her on every page. She imagined him at his shop on a narrow alley in the Mondai-e waiting for her with a smile that made her body rush with warmth, her skin tingle with pleasure” (p. 30).

This text develops Halajan as a subject of lust and beauty. Her response to the handwriting of Rashif, her tactile warmth, and her pleasure in his alleged smile are all types of interiorities that leave older Afghan women at two-dimensional oppressive or traditional characters. Spivak (1993, p. 35), the secret letter, was delivered due to weekly market messages theorises as strategic essentialism: a strategic alliance is created around a shared cause, i.e., retention of romantic love, which in this case functions within regimes of dominant power.

The resistance of Halajan is significant in terms of historical consciousness. She does not stand against her ignorant position but against historical knowledge. She recalls how Afghanistan, before the Taliban, was really like:

"A remnant of the pre-Russian era of the 1970s — when women were free to study, to work, to come and go as they pleased, to wear almost anything they wanted as long as it was respectful to Muhammad" (p. 29).

It is this historical memory that provides the background to Halajan's opposition. Her rebellion is not influenced by Western feminism or the liberal concept of individual autonomy; it is based on the experience of a previous Afghan modernity. This difference is paramount to postcolonial feminist analysis. The tendency to present Afghan women's resistance in the absence of, or subsequent to, Western intervention, as Abu-Lughod (2002, p. 787) argues, overlooks the long-standing history of struggles Afghan women have waged for their rights and self-determination. Besides, the personal history of Halajan is placed by the narrator in the framework of the national history:

"She looked back on her life as a time line of the regimes that had run her beloved Afghanistan... and she realized she, like her country, had survived. The evils inflicted from the outside had been nowhere near as deadly as the poisons that had grown from within" (p. 30).

This text directly compares the individual and the political, where Halajan is both an individual woman and a representation of national strength. Her survival is representative of the survival of Afghanistan; her struggle with patriarchal authority forms the micro kingdom of resisting the country to external invasion, as well as the resistance to the extremist Muslim population. Such comparisons of personal and national identity, according to Bhabha (1994, p. 36), are typical of the postcolonial condition, in which individual selfhood is already shaped by colonialism. Another important facet of her agency is evident when Halajan arrives at the café after midnight. She wants the private courtyard to be the place of freedom:

"The taste of freedom was a strong and delicious elixir that never left her mouth" (p. 28).

This image of freedom as taste, or as a sense of physical taste that remains in the body, creates freedom not as an abstract political phenomenon but as an experience. The body is the first terrain on which agency becomes active, and the aspect of resistance in sensory dimensions, including the taste, smell, and enjoyment of prohibited sexual relations, is the focus of Mahmood (2005), in order to understand how subordinated subjects might cope with their situation.

Key Findings

Such a textual analysis of *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* in the framework of postcolonial feminist theory of Spivak, along with the textual analysis approach of Belsey, yielded two interwoven findings, which lead to a complex interpretation of the process of agentic representation of Afghan women in Western-written fiction.

The Representational Paradox Finding One: this article has identified a structural predicament in which Rodriguez's long-term effort to humanize, individualize, and empower the characters of Afghan women is both facilitated and restricted by the narrative machinery of Western writers. Her role in the case of Yazmina, the kidnapping on the first pages and her

life at the coffeehouse proves that her agency, such as her strategic self-sacrifice to save Layla or her secret pregnancy or her creativity as a writer, is on the one hand supported at the thematic level, and on the other hand moderated at the structural level with the help of the Western evaluative gaze of Sunny. This amounts to what Spivak (1988, p. 281) describe as epistemic violence, which is the establishment of a subject of hegemonic knowledge as object and not a subject of discourse in her own right. Nevertheless, Yazmina is also a free ethical agent in the novel, especially in her well-calculated act of sacrificing her resistance in favour of safeguarding her younger sister, which demonstrates agency grounded in Afghan kinship rather than individualism.

Micro-Resistance and its theoretical limits. The character of Halajan represents the most prevalent and symbolically rich forms of agency in the novel. That secret smoking, which the narrator explains as dangerous, contemptuous, fearless, her own hair cutting, as her own statement of freedom, and her six-year-long secret correspondence with Rashif are all ways of micro-resistance functioning within patriarchal constraints. The discussion has shown that Halajan's actions constitute a productive conflict between the phenomenological notion of agency-as-inhabitation forwarded by Mahmood and the structural criticism of Spivak. No single framework can claim this level of complexity. The argument behind the study was that holding both frameworks in tension was more analytically fruitful than resolving in favor of one or the other.

Conclusion

By employing postcolonial feminist theory critically, the researcher has interpreted how the novel *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* by Deborah Rodriguez depicts the agency and subjectivity of Afghan women using subalternity, epistemic violence, and the concept of strategic essentialism by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the ideological textual analysis method pioneered by Catherine Belsey. This study concludes that *The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul* creates multiple intersecting agencies of Afghan women operating at varying levels. These are strategic agency, which is manifested by the predictive nature of Yazmina in deciding to surrender her own resistance in order to protect her sister Layla from being snatched by traffickers; embodied agency, which was shown through the smoking that Halajan does, as dangerous, contemptuous and fearless; cutting of her hair as a personal statement about freedom, and the preservation of secret romantic correspondence; creative agency, which finds its expression in the dreams of beautiful clothes of which Yazmina dreams, and relational agency which is expressed in the mutual fidelity on the part of the people in the novel.

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