

White Woman's Burden: A Critique of White Women's Portrayal in Selected Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract *Image of white women occur frequently in postcolonial writings. This paper attempts to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the white women's portrayals in the selected Pakistani postcolonial fiction to determine the comparative discrepancy between the assumptions and reality about the role of white women in the colonies. The white women being the part of civilizing mission of the white man, are seen with a particular light by the indigenous people because in comparison to the white man, white women's role has been that of a benevolent mother. This problematizes the situation and hence calls for the investigation into the portrayals and the roles of the white women as projected by the indigenous writers. The study delimits to Forster, Sidhwa, and Hamid and analyses the selected chunks of the text under the lens of theoretical frame work proposed by Jayawardena within the postcolonial context.*

Key Words:
White Women, Postcolonial fiction, Indigenous writers, Civilizing mission, portrayals of white women.

Introduction

Kipling (1899) pointed out in favour of the white man's burden in his poem in 1899 but this burden has been claimed long ago by the initiation of the colonial era by the European powers and is continuing up to postcolonial and neo-colonial times. The same burden has further been translated into modern American missions in various parts of the world like Afghanistan and Middle East. But it is equally interesting that neither did Kipling point out about the burden which the white women carried in the colonies nor was touted by the postcolonial theorists as they did in case of men. Jayawardena (1995) points out that "To Asian women and men, however, these same Western women appeared in a different light—some as goddesses, others as devils, depending on their attitudes to local nationalism, women's equality and social change" (p. x). And there is available another version of the burden of the white women in the colonies which Jayawardena (1995) explains that white western woman is considered bad woman when she is a critic of the local social and religious values and she is good woman when she is a theosophist, missionary or a holy mother "who found Hinduism or Buddhism liberating, found traditional South Asian society more attractive and acceptable than her own, and, most important, sympathized with and supported local nationalist aspirations" (p. 2). Jayawardena (1995) further cites Tiffany and Adams and refers to a contrastive image of women from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that Kurtz's African mistress as "savagely and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent is in contrast to his polite, English fiancée (quoted in Jayawardena, pp 30–31). This contrastive and conflicting image of white women created social issues for the indigenous people and created hurdles in the way of the white rulers as well as that of the women who wanted to share the burden of the white men. For example, Jayawardana (1995) says that "White women were considered the guardians of the purity of the race, and those who did not conform to this image were, therefore, a threat to colonial rule. Those who had local friends were accused of going jungli and their socializing with local men was seen as racial betrayal (pp 3-4), while these white women as "Missionaries, nuns and social reformers felt they had a moral duty to uplift, sanitize and modernize traditional societies (and especially family life) through Christianizing and "civilizing" (Jayawardena 1985, p. 9). For example, Jayawardana reminds her readers that "Equally famous was Madeleine Slade, from an upper-class British family who became Gandhi's devoted follower, assuming the name Mira Behn.

The study is based on three texts, titled: Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Forster's *A Passage to India*. The author intends to explore the character portrayals of white women in these novels as given by an Forster in his writings about the Indian colonized people, and by an indigenous writer (Hamid) who makes his characters travel from USA to Pakistan after 9/11, and, with a different perspective, by Sidhwa, who portrays a white woman's character against the back drop of the indigenous women trapped in the customs and tradition meant to control their bodies and movements. The common thread that binds these portrayals is that these are portrayed as fully developed, empowered and emancipated characters as compared to the indigenous ones who are shown to be colonized, poor and likely to suffer at the hands of the men and the other colonizers. Although Forster's *A Passage to India* was written at the time when colonial master was still holding his occupation on the Indian territory while Sidhwa's text *The Pakistani Bride* is written while Pakistani women were undergoing double colonization after the process of decolonization in South Asia, and Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* portrays a white woman in the context of 9/11, yet the portrayal of white woman in postcolonial fiction has been projecting almost the same image in colonised societies, regarding their sharp and visible contrast from the portrayal of indigenous women. This poses a question as to why the passage of time has failed in changing the portrayals of the white women or our writers even when decolonized societies are still working on the agenda of the white man.

Literature Review

Besides Jayawardena (1995), Burton (1990) also points out that the involvement of white women within the colonies just at that time when western feminism was taking its ground in Europe and the British women were in search of their own emancipation and liberation sought to do so in the colonies as well. This coincidence resulted in support of the imperialist agenda and the point of view of white man's burden in his colonies. For example, Burton (1990) maintains that "A review of feminist periodical literature reveals that British feminists constructed the image of a helpless Indian womanhood on whom their own emancipation in the imperial nation state ultimately relied. Thus, in both practice and theory, the Indian woman served as a foil against which British feminists could gauge their own progress." (Burton, 1990, pp 295-308). Similarly, Sayed and Ali (2011) also point out that the studies in White women's burden have resulted in disparage of the identity voices and contexts of the women of colour.

On a contrary note, Ware (2016) argues that the white women were unable to support their sisters in India with reference to feminism that they were fighting in their native countries because they were thought to be the precious property of the white man which needed to be protected. While the similar protection was not available for their local sisters in colonies. This reduced the status of women which they were fighting for via Feminism in Europe. Boehmer (1998) discusses the existence of superiority consciousness in empire and belies that "The literature of empire, readers might, therefore, understandably assume, must be largely preoccupied with ideas of European superiority and the 'enlightenment' of natives once seen as consequent upon that superiority. Such vast differences of position had important implications also for writing" (p. xviii). The same difference indicates that the men, for example, were imperialist in nature and their women were not so. But it is a big reality that women were not simply the care givers at home but were also travellers and social reformers and critics as well as journalists and missionaries.

Tawasali and Mirzapour (2014) while discussing the feminist elements in *A Passage to India* point out that it is not the success of the two British women in India, rather it is their failure and finds that it is not simply the matter of women's power but it is the way they interact with the world and the women who lament to point out to such laws which construct and reshape such ideologies and provides a culturally constructed definition of their house hold. They (2014) claim that this attitude of the British women towards Indians makes them victims of their own hallucinations rather than being a racist, especially who was too young to understand differences of cultures and over reacted as she would have in her own country. So, the white women in India may also be understood as the helpless victims of their own selves, even when these have been treated with extraordinary love by the Indians.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial feminist theorists have preferably discussed the misrepresentation or absence of colonized status of women from the struggle for independence, rather have been pointing out the double colonization of women in colonized territories. And while doing so have given the impression that white women did not do enough for the sisters inside the colonized and supported a selected few for the benefits of white women feminist. In colonies, therefore, women were mostly left to struggle against not only the white man and women but also their own

brethren. Tyagi (2014) refers that “economic, religious and familial structures are judged by Western standards; the “typical” Third World woman is thus being defined as religious, family-oriented, legal minors, illiterate and domestic. Through this production of a Third World Other, White Western feminists are discursively representing themselves as being sexually liberated, free-minded, in control of their own lives” (P. 49) And again he continues as “The White feminist concept of “sisterhood” is therefore also criticized by Mohanty, as it implies a false sense of common experiences and goals; as if all women are oppressed by a monolithic, conspiring sort of patriarchal dominance. (p. 49) But should we assume that these women had a very different voice as compared to the voice of men? In order to find an answer, the writers have read the selected text of the novels relevant to this question and has presented the analysis as follows in the later pages.

Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion

The researchers intend to argue with the help of the chunks of text to provide the answer to the above questions. Hence, the character portrayal of Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested from Forster's Novel *A Passage to India*, Carol from Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Erica from Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* may be discussed here to set a base for the discussion on the portrayals of white women.

Mrs. Moore is portrayed as a holy woman with a very kind motherly attitude bent upon proving the positive values of the English society and insisting on being good and polite to the others. She becomes the advocate for the polite behaviour of the empire and wishes that “one touch of regret – not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart – would have made him a different man, and the British Empire a different institution” (Forster, 1924, p. 49) And continues further by saying that “I'm going to argue, and indeed dictate,” (Forster, 1924, p. 49). This quality of the character of Mrs. Moore creates space for her in the Indian heart and as a result Dr. Aziz becomes biggest supporter of her goodness. Even, Mrs Moore herself believed in the goodness of the universe and thought all humanity shares this goodness and can claim it as well. She believes therefore, that the empire may treat the children of God rightly and provide them comfort. The quality of goodness in Mrs. Moore has been the obsession with the writer and so has highlighted it in the novel in several pages. For example, while discussing about the dignity concept for the Indians and for her own nation, whose representative is her son as well, Forster (1924) says, “Mrs. Moore was surprised to learn this, dignity not being a quality with which any mother credits her son” (p. 20).

Mrs. Moore is painted by the writer in the similar colour throughout the novel. For example, just after this scene, Mrs. Moore feels suffocated and hence prefers to come out to watch the moon, representing another beautiful mystery of the nature. This makes Mrs. Moore a little bit of a Sufi in the context of Indian traditions. Mrs. Moor exclaims after she has a look at the bright moon, “In England the moon had seemed dead and alien” (Forster, 1924, p. 25). Mrs. Moore is constantly defying the superior feelings of her white community with which she is occasionally bombarded by the people around her. She is reminded frequently by them that “You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality” (Forster, 1924, p. 38). She is shown ignoring this and advancing her loving extension towards the Indians whenever and wherever she finds a chance to do so. The tone of Sufi nature of Mrs. Moore continues in the novel to differentiate them from the male white colonisers. This softer image of Mrs. Moore continues even when she is dispatched to England at a time when her presence in India was much needed to save Dr. Aziz from the humiliation he was suffering.

The similar angle of being a God gifted and a motherly figure is reflected in Adela as well when she is talking to Dr. Aziz about universal brotherhood. She repeats that she is not religious but she has the spirit of religion in her—of the religion that propagate universal brother hood. She while realising that the friendship between the white and the brown is not possible because of the multiple barriers that seem existing and persistent and finds its roots in postcolonial theory that these barriers need to be cracked and fractured so that humanity could shake hands with each other regardless of colour or cast or creed. She says, “There will have to be something universal in this country – I don't say religion, for I'm not religious, but something, or how else are barriers to be broken down?” (Forster, 1924, p. 153). Ronney entertains the idea that Adela cannot be taken for granted. For example, he says that “But Adela, who meditated spending her life in the country, was a more serious matter; it would be tiresome if she started crooked over the native question” (Forster, 1924, p. 27). Adela is being portrayed not as a political figure as was the case about many of the white women visiting the colonies. She is shown to be in India only because she was engaged and was about to marry in India, and even in this matter, she was not happy.

In a similar tone, another White woman that we explore in the novel, *The Pakistani Bride*, by Sidhwa (1983) is Carol who is married to Farrukh, an army officer but is flirting with Maj. Mushtaq as well because she feels restricted and limited in her freedom that she enjoyed in USA, while she was unmarried. “The repressed erotic climate was beginning to affect her. In the States, what she had thought was a unique attraction for Farrukh , had in

fact been her fascination with the exotic, and later the attraction has disconcertingly extended itself to include his friends and relatives – and even acquaintances” (Sidhwa, 1983, p. 176). But, soon her exoticism about Pakistani men and women is almost shattered while she was in the toughest mountains of Pakistan. Being an American, she feels proud about having a different status as compared to Pakistani women and attempts to enjoy that status but fails to do so, especially when she comes across the social set up and social relationing of Pakistani male with their family and when she finds the almost dead body of Zaitoon, a Pakistani woman, who attempted to exercise her will and to come out of the social bond created for her. “Growing up in the 1950s, Carol was inexorably conditioned to marriage. She had only one recourse with which to reconcile her feelings and her actions. She had found her love. He must marry her” (Sidhwa, 1983, p. 179). The character of Carol as a white woman carries both the similarities as well as differences. She is similar in the sense that she has her own illusions about the tribal people of Pakistan and her neo-colonial thinking absorbed from her country of birth, makes her having fantasies of being treated as a queen not only by her husband but also by the simple village folks in the hilly areas.

In the novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the writer shows that the white woman Erica was intimate with the brown hero, like the intimacy that Raheen and Karim show with each other in Shamsie's novel *Kartography*, but in the former, the woman is white and has been portrayed as a smart person. For example, when Changez tells about his ambitions of Islamic state, he is challenged by all. It is “Erica alone smiled; she seemed to understand my sense of humor” (Hamid, 2007, p. 17). Erica is portrayed also as a nostalgic character who is fed up with war and its consequences and who attempts to over stress her image by sharing some of the details about her sufferings. Her words, “I'm more unsettled than nervous” (Hamid, 2007, p. 26), are a witness to this nostalgic feeling. The nostalgic situation takes bitter shape when Changez realises that Erica was missing her ex. He, in his effort to please her, offers himself to be the supposed substitute for Chris. Here, too, like Adela, Erica behaves like a person who needs to be pampered and taken care of as if she deserved all this because of her superior position. And like Dr. Aziz, Changez is ready to accept all this superior coloniser's position in comparison to his position behind as colonised. Changez's words are, “I felt overcome and it seemed, suddenly, a possible way forward” (Hamid, 2007, p. 49)

But, on the other hand, Erica's appearance has been given the touch of regality and beauty. Changez says about her, “and when I first saw Erica, I could not prevent myself from offering to carry her backpack. So, stunningly regal was she” (Hamid, 2007, P.11). Her whole body is brought under discussion that she has developed over the years as a dominant discourse that is too sexually attractive to resist the temptation. Such is the dominatingly and sexually attractive image constructed by a Pakistani postcolonial and post 9/11 writer about the white women. This image, however, is more sexually explicit as compared to the image of Adela by Forster in *A Passage to India*. The writer appreciates her body, “and her navel, what a navel: made firm, I would later learn,” (Hamid, 2007, P. 11). She also reveals the aura of feminine beauty with brains as well and is portrayed to be the most cherished company for her colleagues and travel mates. Her liveliness is shown mixed up with the sadness in her description of the wish to write and print a novel, which may provide an outlet for the pent-up feelings that she cannot express. She would occasionally talk to Changez in many philosophical terms and would reveal a little of the things going on her brain. For example, she would talk about the rock pools to suggest that these were like something got still in time or frozen. She fails to recover in the company of Changez and after spending time with him, she retreats back into her nostalgic world and fails to respond to changes for a long time. This condition of her affects Changez as well and he keeps on thinking about the possible cause of her poor condition and reaches the conclusion that Erica is missing Chris who he needs to replace but is unable and so would only try to impersonate him. All attempts fail and one day Changez discovers that Erica had simply walked away and took up her death by drowning as her clothes tied in bundle neatly were found a small rock along the water body.

The above findings show that there is different representation of the white women as the colonized and indigenous women. The white woman is represented to be a precious commodity which needs to be protected by the white woman and that the white woman is constant under threat of being attacked by the brown man for sexual satisfaction. Moreover, the white woman is in an effort to let the brown women also get the similar right as she is having and that there is big burden on her because of such activities.

Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* is one such character which is portrayed with rather a powerful, heavy and holy presence. She appears on the scene as a reconciliatory Christian saint but fails to capture the sainthood in India by not showing her patience enough in the wake of the confusion and chaos caused by the interaction between the two communities. She rather escapes after having fallen disgusted of the whole affair and having fallen ill on her back-home journey. However, the Indian people had taken her as a saint and have given her a status of their friend and well-wisher but she could not withstand the heat and the pressure. She is, therefore, a fit in the opinion of Jayawardana who claimed that most of the white women were considered to be goddess like in the colonies and hence were a persona beyond the reach of the brown women in India.

Same is the case with Erica, another women character in a passage to India. She is equally taken as a goddess in the beginning of the story while she behaves to be a polite educated young but independent woman without any traces of being a sexual entity. But all this in her character is with elements of doubt, nostalgia and confusion. The similar confusion leads her to hallucination when she visits the antiquity of India. She feels that much lost because of the heat and severity of India that she begins to suffer from hallucination and her inner doubt and nostalgia take the front seat and control her and as a result she loses control on herself. In her confusion, she fails to take care of the honour and freedom of one Indian and as a result smashes down the respect for India and instead follows the mental dictates of herself. She becomes an example of the sufferings of a white woman when she is exposed to the ugliness, severity and ancientness of India. She is the one who needs protection from the evil hands of the Indians because a white woman's body is deemed constantly under threat of the Savage Indian.

Erica, the latest entry into the portrayal of white women in the post 9/11 situation, is portrayed as a model of attraction, resourcefulness and commanding position with its own whims and pleasures as we see in the above discussion. She is perfectly able to control her world and allow the intrusion only that much she likes or prefers. But, she, like Mrs. Moore and Ms. Adela seems affected equally by her interaction with the 'Other' world. She begins to retreat into her own self as soon as she witnesses the destruction of World Trade Centre in USA. She converts herself into a much-sinned person against than sinning and constructs a cyst of her past around her because of the reaction of the new orientalist and the reluctant fundamentalist. She assumes herself to be victim of the savagery of the orientalist cum fundamentalist and so undergoes punishment for further victimhood. The extremity of her effort of her retrieval of the pre-9/11 situation lands her into depression that goes out only with death of Erica.

Conclusion

The discussion reveals that the English writers as well as the postcolonial Pakistani writers have worked in the same tone and style about the portrayals of white women in their respective fictions. These portrayals are reflective of the perceptions that we normally have about white women. This perception strictly associates itself with our colonial past and hence the writers of postcolonial societies mostly toe the line of the English writers about the portrayals of the white women. The white women have, therefore, been shown at a level where they can stand on their own and have their will and most of them are also interested in altering the live of the non-white women but fail because of their own imperial issues and hence the divide keeps on existing and even the feminist movement, supposedly beneficial for all the women of the world have also not supported the white women to work for the greater good of their non-white sisters.

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