

**The Veil in Western Eyes and the
Politics of (Mis)Representation in
Nora Twomey's *The Breadwinner*:
*A Graphic Novel***

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Abstract

In the age of imperialism, the western concern with the Muslim world used a more humanitarian face related to democracy, human rights, and the freedom of expression. Likewise, western feminists played a more active role in their attempt to “liberate” Muslim women whom they perceived as brainwashed by their culture and religion. Nevertheless, the discourse on Muslim women’s subjugation took a different turn when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. In fact, their fundamentalist, distorted application of Islam provided western feminists with a growing evidence that Muslim women need saving.

This study attempts to explore the (mis)representation of the Afghan women by western feminists with a special reference to Nora Twomey’s *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel*. This study entails the use of the concepts of postcolonial feminism as theorized by Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Leila Ahmed and Lila Abu–Lughod as well as postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall. Moreover, Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’ will be used to unravel how the portrayal of Muslim women in the graphic novel resulted in the ‘Othering’ of third world women, creating a third world difference.

As per the alliances of graphic fiction with postmodern critical approaches and different academic disciplines, the study will also explain the significance of all medium specific features of the graphic narrative like page layout, panel design, speech balloons, narratorial captions, and sound effects. The functions of filmic techniques used in graphic narrative like camera angle shots and the mise en scène will be thoroughly examined as well in order to support the main argument of the study – mainly criticizing the negative stereotyping of Muslim women in the selected text.

Keywords: Post-colonial Feminism, positioning, Orientalism.

مستخلص

تُسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على تشويه صورة المرأة المسلمة من قبل الدراسات الغربية النسوية التي تنتقد العنف ضد المرأة المسلمة في محاولة إدعاء دور المُحرر للمرأة المسلمة من أنواع القهر التي تتعرض لها وعلى رأسها الحجاب (البرقع). وتتناول الدراسة شرح للنظريات والمفاهيم الأدبية النسوية وما بعد الاستعمار مثل "سبيفاك" و"موهانتى" و"ليلي أحمد" و"ليلي أبو لغد" و"إدوارد سعيد" في تحليل الرواية المصورة "المُعيلة" وطريقة التعبير التصويري في عرض قضية الحجاب كنوع من العنف والقهر الذي يُمارس على المرأة المسلمة ويمحي شخصيتها ويفقدها أهليتها. كما تستعرض الدراسة الخطاب المُعادي للحرية الشخصية والعادات الإجتماعية لدول العالم الثالث، والتعامل معه من منظور غربي لا يُراعي الفروق الثقافية مما يكشف تميزاً وعصبية للثقافة الغربية. وتُصور الدراسة رؤية المرأة الغربية للمرأة المسلمة المحجبة كسجينة تحتاج من ينقذها و طرق التعبير التصويري والسينمائي في الرواية المصورة وكيف ساهمت في اغراق صورة المرأة المسلمة في التشويه. وتوضح الدراسة كيف

أظهرت الرواية المرأة المسلمة بصورة نمطية تقلل من شأنها وتخلق فرقاً يوصمها بالتخلف والإختلاف. كما تكشف الدراسة كيف رسمت الرواية المصورة بأدوات سردية دلالية مختلفة العنف والجهل والدموية التي تميز رجال تنظيم طالبان في مقابل ضعف ووهن الرجال من خارج تنظيم طالبان مما يتطلب تدخل الفارس الأبيض لشن حرباً عالمية على الإرهاب لتحرير المرأة وحمايتها.

Introduction and Background

Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, an image of submissive and oppressed Muslim women has dominated their Western verbal representations. In the age of imperialism, the Western concern with the Muslim world used a more humanitarian face related to democracy, human rights, and the freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the discourse on Muslim women's subjugation took a different turn when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. In fact, their fundamentalist, distorted application of Islam provided Western feminists with a growing evidence that Muslim women need saving. In 1996, the Feminist Majority Foundation had launched "Our Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan", which received support from many feminists in the US, such as US talk show host and media mogul Oprah Winfrey (Puar 50). But only when Sally Armstrong, a Canadian journalist, wrote her controversial article "Veiled Threat" in 1997 that Canadian feminists considered assuming their

matronizing role towards Afghan women by establishing the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan organization (CW4WAfghan) in 1998.

In 2000, Deborah Ellis, a Canadian writer, a feminist and a political activist penned her bestselling novel *The Breadwinner* about Parvana, a Muslim girl in Afghanistan who has neither a face nor a voice under the harsh rule of the Taliban. The fact that her name means a butterfly foreshadows her constant search for liberation. In 2018, *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel* was published based on the original novel by Deborah Ellis and adapted from the animated movie *The Breadwinner* directed by Nora Twomey in 2017. Like the original novel, this graphic version sheds light on the Afghan women in ways that could manipulate knowledge construction to justify a perpetual imperial dominance over this part of the world which belongs to the so called “third world”. This graphic adaptation is worth studying due to its hybridity as a medium of narrative, combining showing and telling and its peculiar ability to engage the reader in the process of the verbal/ pictorial (mis)representation of Muslim third world women – an issue around which the whole study revolves.

Before examining how the Western feminist discourse can be applied to studying the case of an Afghan woman who needs saving, the argument in this study entails shedding light on the

United States–Afghanistan relationship before 9/11 when the original novel was published and after 9/11 since the graphic adaptation was published nearly two decades later. In fact, the US interest in Afghanistan started after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the country became a battlefield for the Cold War between the Soviets and the United States. During the Soviet invasion, the United States supported financially and militarily the Mujahedin Afghani freedom fighters fighting off Soviet invasion. This support rapidly increased in 1985, in the midst of the Cold War, by the Reagan administration.

After the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989, a civil war broke out and in the chaos that followed, the Taliban sprang up. In 1996, the Taliban seized control of Kabul and applied a hardline version of Islam. In 1998, the tension between those US–made Taliban and the United States became clear when they protected Osama bin Laden, the head of Al Qaeda as he was accused of bombing US embassies in Africa, and the United States launched missile strikes at suspected bases of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The fall of Afghanistan under the fundamentalist rule of the Taliban and the subsequent forced imposition of ‘*burqa*’ (veil) on women was the perfect pretext for the intervention of Western feminists. Perceiving the veil as the universal sign of these

women's subjugation, Western feminists embarked on the journey of liberating Muslim women from the *burqa* imposed by the "uncivilized" Afghans. Though the Taliban were defeated shortly after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, they were able to regroup in the following years. Ironically, after using the Afghan woman, oppressed by the Taliban, to justify war (which secured the US oil interests in the region), the United States signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020. This sudden turn in the American policy leads to questioning the Western feminists' concern with the 'liberation' of the Afghan Muslim women and calling for their human rights.

Aim of the Study

This study attempts to explore the (mis)representation of the Afghan women by Western feminists with a special reference to Nora Twomey's *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel*. This study entails the use of the concepts of postcolonial feminism as theorized by Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Leila Ahmed and Lila Abu-Lughod as well as postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall. Moreover, Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' will be used to unravel how the portrayal of Muslim women in the graphic novel resulted in the 'Othering' of third world women, creating a third world difference. In addition to this, the systemized vilification of veil, depicting it as the primary source

of third world women's misery will be closely examined. As per the alliances of graphic fiction with postmodern critical approaches and different academic disciplines, the study will also discuss the significance of all medium specific features of the graphic narrative like art style, page layout, panel design, speech balloons, narratorial captions, and sound effects. The functions of filmic techniques used in graphic narrative like camera angle shots and the mise en scène will be thoroughly examined as well in order to support the main argument of the study – mainly criticizing the negative stereotyping of Muslim women in the selected text. In this process of (mis)representation, an image of an abused Muslim woman/girl at the hands of barbaric and savage 'other' men is constructed, reinforcing the stereotype of Muslim girls as needing to be saved.

The Concept of the Subaltern and Western Feminism

Before examining the multiple ways by which women were silenced in the novel, it is worth exploring the concept of the 'subaltern' introduced by Gayatri Spivak in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By the "subaltern", Spivak means the oppressed subjects or more generally those of an inferior status. These groups of people have been marginalized through the physical occupation of colonialism or through the economic and

cultural imperialism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In her critique to the British representation of the abolition of Sati, Spivak attacks the epistemic violence involved in the process of ‘speaking for’, in the sense of political representation, and ‘speaking about’ or ‘re-presenting’, in the sense of making a portrait (70). She argued that in speaking for her, even as they re-present her, the British neglect their own complicity in the representational process. By prohibiting this cultural practice, the brown woman is saved. In doing so, the colonizer silences the voice of the woman who might choose to die after the death of her husband. In this respect, under the pretense of saving a third world woman, the dominant regimes of representations might obliterate her agency and deny her the right to speak.

Invoking Spivak’s views on the abolition of Sati is indeed essential for the argument of this study. It is meant to draw an analogy between women “victimized” by this traditional Indian practice and women “victimized” by fundamentalist Islamic practices. Ironically, this only meant for both the Indian and the Afghan women as Spivak eloquently puts it, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (93). Accordingly, Spivak reiterates in her seminal essay that, as subjects of history in colonial texts, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (83).

Apart from Spivak's valid question, which highlights the role of Western feminism in silencing the concerned Afghan women, the white women's representation of "brown women" in the selected novel raises another important question: How could the Western feminists' discourse on a supposedly oppressed woman save her face? While claiming to save her, those feminists are establishing their superiority as white, first world feminists over forever brown, third world subjects. This is exactly what undermines Western feminist scholarship as Chandra Mohanty explains in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". In this essay first published in 1986, Mohanty dismantled "the production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" by Western feminists (333). Unlike feminism's expected tolerance to cultural plurality, this notion of a third world woman ignores the diversity of women's lives in the other non-white half of the sphere. Hence, Mohanty challenges the assumptions of "ethnocentric universality", which regard Western culture as the norm against which all 'other' cultures should be measured. She also criticized Western feminists' failure to visualize the negative impact Western feminism will have on an endlessly inferior, third world woman.

According to Mohanty, Western feminists employed different methodologies to prove patriarchal dominance and female inferiority across all cultures. One significant method is arguing that the veil is the ultimate proof of women's oppression – the issue around which this study revolves. In this respect, Mohanty, as a postcolonial feminist, draws the reader's attention to a more detrimental impact of Western feminism: its "conflation with imperialism" (335). After publishing *The Breadwinner* in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, a monolithic Afghan woman spoken for and portrayed in the original novel became a pawn to justify the War on Terrorism and Feminism alike. The novel was immediately translated into twenty-five languages and became a bestseller for putting a humanitarian face on this crusade. This greatly relates to Edward Said's invaluable contribution to the postcolonial theory: *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said demonstrates how knowledge fabricated by Orientalists about the Orient empowered the West to pursue its colonial project. At the beginning of his book, he defines the Orient as a place which is close to Europe, its most frequent image of the Other, but more importantly, "its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (2).

Dividing the world unequally into the Occident and the Orient, Orientalism is in essence Eurocentric which constructed the Orient as the archetypal Other: inferior, exotic and backward. Said contends that such stereotyped images have been accepted as true because this knowledge was constructed in a systemized way, and hence very difficult to deconstruct. As the misrepresentation of the Orient was structured by Occidental interests, the Orient is seen as a place that desperately needs the Western intervention in a civilizing mission. The positioning of the Afghan colonized identity in the selected novel supports the Western imperialism, stretching between the first production and the subsequent adaptations, and entails going back to Edward Said and his other valuable contribution, *Culture and Imperialism*. Said proves the consistent misrepresentation of the Orient by the “metropolitan” Western societies. He even argues that these works have to be reread within a framework of ‘interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories’ (xx). Thus, Said’s argument is essential for this study to highlight the serious impact the graphic novel can have in supporting imperialism. In other

words, *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel* perpetuated the ‘Othering’ of Muslim women in the palimpsest of imperialism.

Graphic Narrative Techniques

In the intriguing case of *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel*, the mode of engagement combines telling and showing due to what Sabin calls “the marriage of text and image” (9). In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner defines the medium of graphic narrative as the sequential art in which the artist’s task is to “arrange the sequence of events (or pictures) so as to bridge the gaps in action” (38). The story of a graphic novel is told through a progression of frames, technically referred to as panels. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud defines graphic novels as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,” portrayed to deliver a certain meaning and make an aesthetic effect on the reader (9). This sequential art, according to McCloud, requires participation on part of the reader to fill in the gaps between panels in a mental process called “closure” (63).

In graphic narrative, just like in the film narrative, “the image is the vehicle” as the film semiotician Christian Metz points out in his book *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Metz points out that the image does not correspond to words in a sentence, but rather to full statements which “yield to the receiver a quantity

of indefinite information” (26). Thus as Horstkotte explains, the shape, colour and framing of a panel could communicate a certain meaning, yet, the image inside the panel simultaneously adds layers to meaning, constructing “a complex narrative” which depends on literary and filmic techniques in an ongoing challenge to the “readers’ interpretive choices” (45). Hence, the analysis of the selected graphic novel will take place by shedding more light on the picture inside the panel which adds layers to the meaning. Furthermore, in *The Breadwinner: A Graphic Novel*, the medium-specific features such as panels, the sequence of panels in a page, speech balloons, and sound effects support the interpretive attempt of this study. However, the most apparent features in this graphic novel, in particular, are the filmic techniques such as the camera’s position and the mise en scène. Borrowed from theatre, the French phrase mise en scène, meaning “putting into the scene,” is defined by Groensteen as organizing “the different parameters of the image (framing, choice of point of view, composition, “actions” of the characters, lighting, etc.) in accordance with the internal dynamic of the sequence, to produce an aesthetic or dramatic effect, and for an immediate readability of what constitutes, in the image, a pertinent utterable” (120). As in cinematography, Kress and Leeuwen pointed out that

perspective, determined by the camera height, is an important means of expression. If a character is looked at from a low angle, then this character probably has power over the viewer; if the character is looked down at from a high angle, then the producer of the image as well as the viewer might have dominance over the character. Finally, if the image is at eye level, then there might be no power difference (140). On the other hand, the size of frame determines social distance, and whether the characters are depicted from a small or a long distance. Hence, the variation between close-ups, medium shots, and long shots manipulates the social distance between the character or the “represented subject” and the viewer.

Alliances of Graphic Narrative with Feminist and Post-Colonial Approaches

It is noteworthy that this pictorial representation of the veil by Nora Twomey with her animation team, the creators of the graphic novel, vilified it, depicting it as the primary source of third world women’s misery. This study attempts to explore the simplistic representation of the plight of the Afghan women that not only ignores the cultural-specific meaning of veil, but most importantly nullifies Afghan women’s agency and silences them. The study, accordingly, examines the veil rhetoric in the selected graphic novel to show Western feminism’s conflation with imperialism

which politicized the forced imposition of the veil to justify an endless “War of Terror”.

Linking the veil to oppression and backwardness is what shamed the veiled women for decades. Indeed, “The Discourse of Veil,” is impressively explained by Leila Ahmed in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* in which Ahmed unravels how the veil became the symbol for women’s oppression by the European colonial powers in the Muslim world. Laila Ahmed maintains in her study that attacking the practice of veiling which started in the late 19th century was “constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed to male dominance in the service of political ends” (165). However, as Ahmed eloquently points out:

When items of clothing – be it bloomers or bras – have briefly figured as focuses of contention and symbols of feminist struggle in Western societies, it was at least Western feminist women who were responsible for identifying the item in question as significant and defining it as a site of struggle and not, as sadly has been the case with respect to the veil for Muslim women, colonial and patriarchal men... who declared it important to feminine struggle. (166,167)

The above quotation signifies that a single “item of clothing” is

used to define the misery of the woman and in turn applies specifically to the Afghan woman examined in this study.

In her essay “Under Western Eyes”, Mohanty points out that Western feminism, in spite of its illuminating value in some cases, is problematic not only because of its possible complicity with imperialism, but most importantly because of the way they present themselves differently than their representation of third world women. According to Mohanty, Western feminists employed different methodologies to prove the universal patriarchal dominance and female inferiority across all cultures. On the top of these methodologies is arguing that veil is the ultimate proof of women’s oppression: the more the number of veiled women, the more universal is the subjugation of women. Nevertheless, as Mohanty clearly points out, “It is the analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women that must be questioned” (353).

In the following panel, as in most of the graphic novel, Kabul is muted, dusty and still. Nora Twomey explains their choice of color in portraying Afghanistan, “we wanted the real world of Afghanistan to be very evocative – for the audience to feel the dust, to be fully immersed” (qtd. in Bennett). Artists of graphic novels also use light and shadow to induce a certain feeling in

the viewer. Eisner explains their effect “shadow evokes fear – light implies safety” (149). The Talib in figure 1 interrupts the flow of light, casting a shadow over Parvana and her father, literally and figuratively, and emphasizing Parvana’s insecurity when confronted with this Talib, whose very presence blocks the sun of her freedom.



Figure 1, panel 2, p. 13

The shot in this panel is an over-the-shoulder shot, which in film or television, a shot is called over the shoulder shot (OTS hereafter) when the camera is positioned behind one character and facing another; so the shoulder and back of the first character are facing the audience. This OTS shot of Parvana and her father, taken over the shoulder of the Talib, with the wall strewn with bullet holes in the background of this unbalanced conflict, constructs the power relation between the characters involved and shows the viewer the uncomfortable confrontation between Parvana’s father and the Talib. Taken from above, as the Talib

is looking down at Parvana and her father, this shot shows the Talib's hegemony over both of them.

The skillful depiction of facial expressions and posture is an important tool in the graphic narrative (Eisner 111). This panel is focused on Parvana and her father's facial expressions. Their sad eyebrows reveal their despair. In fact, the realist graphic style of this novel neither allows a Western reader to identify with Parvana the Muslim protagonist nor with any other character. According to McCloud, the realist graphic style and the use of colors do not only objectify the characters but signify also their "otherness from the reader" (44, 188). The body language of Parvana, being curled up, closing arms, and avoiding eye contact with the reader and the Talib at the same time, objectifies her. According to Kress and Leeuwen, when the portrayed person has no eye contact with the viewer, then the image is an "offer" image; the viewer is set as the subject and the represented character is the object of the viewer's gaze "as though they were specimens in a display case" (119). Such "objectification" of third world women in Western literature, depicting them as objects influenced by others, is what should be challenged even if intended for their own good (Mohanty 338).

In Western eyes, life is hell under the *burqa*. In the following two opposite panels, life before the Taliban is juxtaposed with life after the Taliban:



Figure 2, top panels, pp. 10 & 11

These two panels apparently reveal the power of the pictorial representation. In graphic narratives, unlike films, the *mise en scène* depends upon the coexistence of juxtaposed images simultaneously (Collins 160). The layout of these two opposite pages in figure 2 is brilliant in its arrangement of panels, so that these equal in size, opposite panels, placed at the top of the page, appear in sharp contrast to one another. These juxtaposed pictorial images are placed intentionally in this specific way to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud 9). As frequently portrayed in images, the known and approved practice is placed on the left, while the unknown is placed on the right. In

the left panel, girls are happy, not segregated from boys, looking healthy, unlike the pale skin they must have developed under the *burqa* in the right panel. The colorful panel on the left with the light blue of a clear sky in the background appears in opposition to the death-colored life under the Taliban on the right. Not only does this cheerful image come in sharp contrast with the opposite gloomy image, but also in contrast with the lifeless, muted color in most of the graphic novel. Interestingly enough, both girls in the left panel are portrayed playing football with their hair uncovered, while both boys are wearing hats, and one of them is reading while sitting on the ground. Such reversal of roles destroys patriarchal patterns, the Western feminists' ultimate obsession. Hence, as Mohanty points out, Western feminists confine women as a monolithic category to their gender identity ignoring "social class and ethnic identities" which automatically means their subordination and exploitation by men. This simplistic analysis reinforces binary oppositions between men and women instead of dissolving them (344).

On the contrary, the panel on the right shows women imprisoned behind bars, wearing their gloomy blue *burqa*. This blue hue of their *burqa* reveals coldness and distance from the reader, setting the gloomy atmosphere of the rest of the novel. The eye-level camera angle homogenizes and systemizes these third world

women. By closure, the reader's mind can think of many other women outside the borders of the panel, and the borders of Western liberty as well. Accordingly, as Mohanty points out, Western feminists establish their dominance and create "Third World Difference" by their appropriation of the cultural complexities of the third world which leads to a "process of homogenization and systemization of the oppression of women in the third world" (335).

Filmic Techniques in the Graphic Novel

Only by reaching the last panel in the following three-panel sequence in figure 3 will the reader probably realize the reality of the prison portrayed in the top panel. The prison is the *burqa* itself:

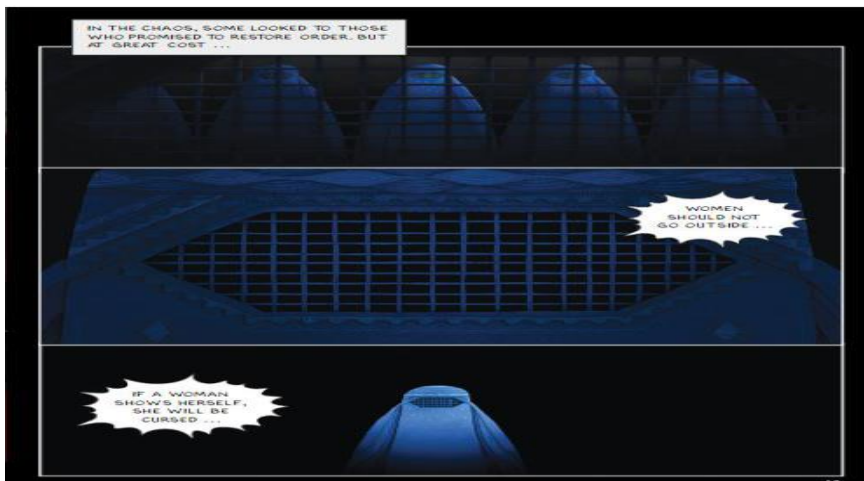


Figure 3, p. 11

The close-up shot in the second panel creates drama that is even doubled with the jagged outline of speech balloons which express alarm and anger. This is one of the artists' techniques, according to Eisner, to invoke sound on a silent print page (26). These jagged balloons, preceded with the narratorial caption, help the reader listen to the aggressive voice of the Taliban imprisoning and cursing women, showing the "chaos" of the Taliban's rule. In the last panel, lighting is used again but this time in the form of "chiaroscuro": an artistic lighting choice used in comics and films in which the focus point or subject of a scene is brightly colored and contrasted with a dark background, the purpose of which is to increase the scene's dramatic tension (Duncan and Smith 143). The dark shading around the woman in *burqa* allows her to stand out and gives her a dramatic aura which is intensified by the high angle shot that isolates her from the women of the first world.

This three-panel sequence in figure 3 can haunt the memory of the Western reader and prove more than any verbal narrative that Muslim women do need saving. In fact, Leila Abu-Lughod posed the same question in her essay "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" In this essay, Abu-Lughod critiqued the perception of the veil as "the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban" (785) and called for further questioning of

these situations where Western feminists as the French feminists in Algeria and Laura Bush in Afghanistan superficially claim to be saving Muslim women. In her speech to the nation in November 2001, the former First Lady Laura Bush announces, “Because of our recent military gains, in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes.” The fact is, as Abu Lughod explains it, that *burqa* existed in Afghanistan before the Taliban, and it is the traditional costume of Pashtun women, a respectable ethnicity in Afghanistan. Being Pashtun in origin, the Taliban imposed *burqa* on other non-Pashtun women. Hence, representing the imposition of it as a terrorist act by the Taliban, though possibly true, ignores the fact that these women, even if liberated from the Taliban rule, might still choose a certain form of veil, including the *burqa*.

To demonize the veil in the graphic novel, visual iconography was the vocabulary of this medium (McCloud 67). The prison bars which appeared in the two previous panels in figure 3, reappear in figures 4 and 5 as a visual icon of women’s confinement under the veil.



Figure 4, bottom panel, p. 25

In the above panel, though walking in the street, Parvana and her mother are depicted behind bars. Like the inmates in a zoo, Khan indicates that “the archetypal image of the veiled woman... remains limited to the immediate sensory experience of what it is like to be confined” (162). Mother in the *burqa* is reduced to a piece of cloth which nullifies her agency, and the girl is covering her mouth and hence silenced. Ironically, this panel proves that the “subaltern as female”, as Spivak rightly points out, is denied the right to speak by dominant representations (83). Thus, what Western feminists fail to grasp is that feminism can take other forms in specific cultural contexts. In other words, the meaning of oppression is not limited to wearing the burqa by force, this burqa also suggests hiding women’s agency and silencing their mouths. This objectification of women is even intensified in the following silent panel which, according to McCloud, produces “a sense of timelessness” (102).



Figure 5, top panel, p.27

The close-up on Parvana's facial expressions in this silent panel speak a thousand words as emphasized through the close up. Her sad face and the look in her eyes reflect misery, worry and anticipation. The streak of her hair flowing on her face implies that she is not really worried about completely covering her hair. It might also shed light on her split identity resulting from her the oppression of the Taliban. The headscarf that does not cover her hair completely connotes that it was imposed upon her. Parvana's shock and despair are taken from a frontal angle. Images can be taken from a frontal or an oblique point of view. While the oblique angle means detachment, the frontal means involvement as these horizontal angles signify whether the artist and hence the reader are 'involved' with the represented character or not (Kress and Leeuwen 136). Still too, the *mise en scène* in this panel: the prison bars, the fragments of the father figure, the Talib's violent hand, and the vanishing figure of the mother all demand

involvement from the Western reader/military. According to Dana Cloud, such images “foreground the point of view of the colonizer: It is the American who is able to subject others to her/his gaze and, thus, defines the Afghan woman as the object of US cultural hegemony” (293).

Instead of considering other forms of agency as right and empowering, Western feminists find it easier to generalize their own Western experience (Jones 34). One of these simplistic approaches is portraying *burqa* as a burden that cripples women and impairs their movement. The silent panel below shows how the *burqa* stands as an obstacle in women’s lives. Parvana is seen helping out her mother who is wearing the *burqa*:



Figure 6, bottom panel, p. 24

Depriving a panel of verbal language can, of course, be used to create a very particular effect. According to McCloud, if a panel is single and silent, this can add length to the represented action (101). Also, the mise en scène in the above panel, Father’s stick for example, which Mother is technically using, shows how the *burqa* made Mother as crippled as Parvana’s father. The size of

the frame also contributes to the plight of these Afghan women, suggesting social relations (Kress and Leeuwen 126). The space around the house and its position, apparently on a steep cliff, reflects to the viewer a sense of insecurity and danger. Finally, the long shot, sadly just like Western feminism, establishes “an invisible barrier between the viewer and the object: The object is there for our contemplation only, out of reach, as if on display in a shop window or museum exhibit” (Kress and Leeuwen 128). Hence, this third world mother is dependent and useless; she cannot assume her role like a Western parent would. This will eventually lead to a role reversal when Parvana, the little girl, will be the breadwinner for her family, intensifying her dilemma under Western eyes. The same dominant representation is clear in the following panels:

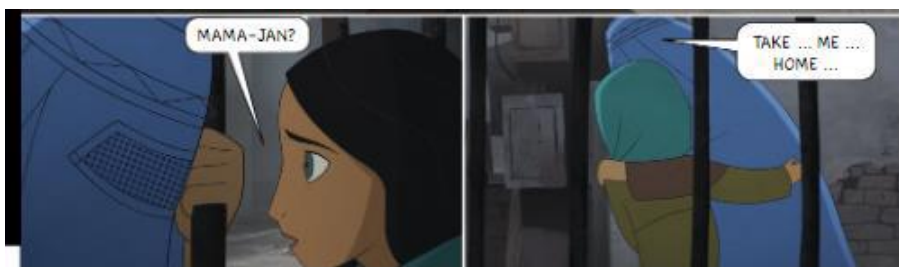


Figure 7, bottom panels, p. 27

The image of a helpless, dependent, imprisoned and victimized mother appears in the panels. The speech balloon reveals the voice of a breathless mother, who is beaten and abused for going

out without her husband. In fact, these two panels are vivid examples of the two types of images that flooded the US media after September 11 attacks: a woman shrouded in her *burqa* or a girl peering out of her veil (Jones 165). Dana Cloud rightly indicates that such widely circulated images in the US media do not only represent Afghanistan as uncivilized versus the civilized West, but also “construct the viewer as a paternalistic savior of women” (286).

In fact, as Rachel Jones indicates, the mental image of Muslim women in the West is either a sexualized image created by Orientalists or the victimized image of an abused woman who is compelled to hide behind her *burqa* (166). This victimized image is accurately portrayed in the following panel. Although Parvana is sleeping, the expression of her face shows that she is a helpless woman, and her feet seem bruised.



Figure 8, middle panel, p. 28

It is worth noting that at the time the graphic novel was produced, 17 years after the fall of the Taliban, some women still chose to cover themselves. *The New York Times* announced triumphantly after the US invasion that now Afghan women can wear *burqa* “out of choice”; hence this “crusade” to free Afghan women has probably paid off (Hirschkind and Mahmood 341). The reason women cover themselves is important to understand before discussing the rhetoric of unveiling in this graphic novel. In “The Veil Debate – Again”, Leila Ahmed explains the reasons why Muslim women veil, and asserts that the reasons are “as varied, multiple, complex, and shifting... as are the women themselves” (248).

In fact, as Loretta Kensinger points out, the representation of the veil as the ultimate sign of oppression proved problematic after September 11 because, paradoxically, the US media “celebrated the veil’s lifting as the US bombs fell” (15). In this unveiling rhetoric, women can either be liberated and uncovered or backward and covered. Thus, as Bullock explains, believing in their superiority, those feminists impose their own Western way of life on the poor backward woman for their own good (221). This could be traced when life becomes colorful without the veil as in the panel below:



Figure 9, bottom panel, p. 36

The market came to life in bright colors instead of the muted colors depicted before. Parvana's light steps signify her liberation from the burden of her veil and from the curse of being a girl. The colorful background with a lot of orange color suggests a sense of optimism for the first time in the graphic novel. Thus, it is a Western obsession with a subjugated woman who seems to be waiting for the West to liberate her and uncover her (Jones 157). It is worth noting that putting her hand on her head signifies that she is checking the headscarf. This might indicate that she is happy because she is liberated from the veil.

The novel suggests that lifting the veiling empowered the Afghan women and restored their agency as they seem more courageous and less submissive. Only at the end of novel, Mother finds a way to her liberation from violence and subjugation, and above all from *burqa*:



Figure 10, bottom panels, p. 71

The transition here between the halves of the top panel, known as aspect to aspect transition; the reader has to collect parts of the picture to construct a single moment (McCloud 79). In fact, the three-panel sequence in Figure 10 offers, as McCloud indicates, unconnected moments that by closure the reader can connect constructing a "continuous, unified reality" (67). The continuous, unified reality here is that by lifting the veil off her face, Mother restores her agency and is instantly liberated. Without the *burqa*, Mother is not even intimidated with a knife. In opposition to Mother's previous disability, uselessness, shame, dependence, subjugation, submission and lack of agency while wearing the *burqa*, her taking the *burqa* out off her face victoriously and independently assumed her role as a parent and defied oppression and misogyny.

Orientalism and ‘Othered’ Muslim Men/Women

It is noteworthy that third world Afghan men were involved in what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* as standardized stereotyping by Western media that reinforced “academic and imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient’” (26). In this systemized demonology, the colonial discourse usually focuses on the animalization and the infantilization of the colonized as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. The US does not only undertake the civilizing mission of the third world, but also vows to save third world women. That is why in her essay “Do Muslim women really need saving?” Lila Abu-Lughod criticizes mobilizing oppressed women in the war against terror, wondering “what violences are entailed in this transformation” (788). She reiterates that the construction of the Afghan woman as needing saving divides the world into East and West reinforcing the dominance of the West. Thus, “the patronizing quality of the rhetoric of saving women” has to be challenged (789).

The construction of essentially oppressed, ‘Othered’ third-world women at the hands of animalized, dehumanized ‘other’ men is, therefore, worth studying. This entails examining thoroughly what Stuart Hall called the “politics of identity” since the cultural identity is a position not an essence. In this graphic novel, Father’s

tenderness and care is clearly shown from the very beginning. Parvana's streak of hair is revealed for the second time in this panel to again indicate that the headscarf does not really need to cover all her hair.



Figure 11, Top panel, p. 16

In this panel, the tiny hands of Parvana held gently in her father's hand and his tender look into her eyes reveal a very special relationship between Parvana and Father. It also foreshadows a gap this loving father will leave after his imprisonment by the Taliban. Impoverished, disabled and abused, his misery and bewilderment are clear in his facial expressions. Parvana's strong bond with her father is further intensified in the panel below:



Figure 12, Top panel, p. 32

In the top panel of this two-panel page, Parvana is apparently concerned about the food she was not able to buy as a girl from the market. However, the bottom silent panel shows the real reason for Parvana's tears. It is the emptiness left behind after her father's imprisonment. Her feelings of sadness and emptiness are depicted clearly in the bottom silent panel where the reader can see the blue color of sadness. The room is literally empty except for a stick of a disabled father, making a fearful physical as well as narrative shadow for the reader of what will happen next to this girl by almost every male in the graphic novel. The size of the panel reveals how vast this emptiness is. Generally, the *mise en scène* shows the shrinking belongings of a strikingly poor family that had to sell almost everything. Yet more

importantly, the *mise en scène* includes scissors which are popping up as the single solution this miserable girl is left with, which is sacrificing her identity as a girl.

The following silent panels speak the story of a transformation from Parvana, meaning butterfly as aforementioned, to Aatish which translates as “fire”. The new name the adapter gave to Parvana, ironically, suggests the unfriendly fire of the coalition troops in their endless attempt to save this Muslim girl.



Figure 13, p. 34

In the first and third panels of this figure, mirrors are used to point to Parvana’s dual nature, signifying her future two conflicting male and female personalities. Using mirrors in this scene can also symbolize Parvana’s loss of identity. Shohat and Stam point out that “in Western iconography, mirrors are often the instruments of

vanitas, or of loss of identity” (254). Such loss of identity is dramatically shown in the third panel by a close-up shot. Parvana’s beauty as a girl in the first half of the page appears in an aching juxtaposition with a feminized child-like masculinity in the second half of the page. The transition between inset panels in the first half of the page is what McCloud calls aspect to aspect; “time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations... the reader here must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments” (79). It is the single silent moment that creates an endless third world difference between Western girls and this victimized, ‘Othered’ Muslim girl.

In “Orientalism and ‘Saving’ US State Identity after 9/11”, Meghana Nayak criticizes these attempts by the United States to speak for Afghan women, erasing their voices as if ‘other’ women are replaceable. This means that real Afghan women are not needed anymore to talk about their own lives. In figure 14 below, there is a vibrant pictorial representation of the history of Afghanistan. Though in the page before Parvana’s father declares that he will tell her the story of the “Silk Road,” the following two pages ended up with only two panels out of six about the Afghan identity and the Silk Road. These opposite pages reveal the colonial positioning of the Afghan identity versus different invaders who are described as “mighty rulers.” In the first

panel, the narrator of the story, who is supposed to be Parvana's father starts his story by introducing the nature of this country: "We were a fractured land in the claws of the Hindu Kush mountains, scorched by the fiery eyes of the northern deserts" (8). This description at the onset of the story does not only remind the reader of the harsh nature of this land, but it represents also Afghanistan as a dangerous, exotic land. In fact, Afghanistan is landlocked and mountainous, and has most of the Hindu Kush mountains. It is indeed scorched by long years of draught. However, being a country in the claws of the Hindu Kush mountains creates a world of mysticism and occultism. This mystical mountainous country is described as a "fractured land" in an indirect reference to Afghanistan's multiethnic tribal society. In fact, since the US invasion of Afghanistan there are many American voices that demand the division and the breaking up of this inherently "fractured" country.



Figure 14, p. 8, 9

In the first panel we see oriental primitive houses that seem to represent the uncivilized and divided nature of this country. The ethnic minorities are possibly represented as scattered houses at the right side of the panel and larger ethnicities grouped at the left half of the panel. In the background, we have the claws of the Hindu Kush mountains which invoke Frantz Fanon's description of the efforts of the native "to escape from the claws of colonialism" as represented from the perspective of the colonizer (*The Wretched of the Earth* 211). This colonial image of an exotic land in the desert is getting more oriental by the depiction of camels and probably old men who are hunched over. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (395). In this colonial

narrative, Afghans appear in the second panel of the left page as traders who carry “goods from east to West” (8). But in this panel, the stars could symbolize the Afghans themselves who are scattered all over the world as immigrants. In sharp contrast with this panel comes the last panel of the left page. Men from other countries are warriors holding swords and riding horses. The narratorial caption in the panel describes Afghanistan as a land while other countries as empires. Afghanistan is presented here as frozen in time and its colonial positioning is presented as well.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said focuses on the role of culture in creating and maintaining imperialist mental and physical structures. He explains how written, visual, or performed art could create group and national identity. Said indicates that “in time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them,’ almost always with some degree of xenophobia” (xiii). This positioning of the Afghan identity is starkly juxtaposed with the “mighty rulers” depicted in the opposite four-panel page. The red coloured and equal-sized panels indicate long, bloody ages of colonization. The narratorial caption in the last panel stresses the idea of an “endless pattern” of colonization where there has been bloodshed (9). What is worth examining here is the hypermasculine features of these

“mighty rulers” versus the Afghans who are stereotypically presented as riding camels and living in the desert in the opposite page. Those “mighty rulers” as Cyrus the Great of Persia, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane are probably glorified in contrast to “tiny” Afghans who are walking bent over, constructing Afghans as either too primitive or too old to fight for their land.

“It is the politics of identity,” thus, as Stuart Hall rightly points out: the cultural identity of Afghans as they “were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation” (394). These misrepresentations are constructed from a superior Western perspective that is supposedly presenting an objective historical account of Afghanistan. The forever colonized identity of Afghans is clearly constructed amid an endless cycle of wars.



Figure 15, p. 10

As in most graphic novels, children here are endlessly running for their lives. Children running from the Russian invasion in the first panel are probably the same children running from Afghans in the civil war, though fewer in number with more bloodshed as indicated by the wider use of red and black in the second panel. The picture is definitely dimmer when the enemy is ‘Other’, brown men. Throughout the text, abused Muslim girls are depicted as being chased by the Taliban as Parvana is seen chased by three boys and she even fails to buy the bread.

The Archetypal Taliban as Caliban

It is noteworthy that the character of Idrees is representative of the archetypal Taliban.



Figure 16, p. 15

In the above page, Idrees displays utter savagery while dealing with Parvana's crippled father. Not only does he show no mercy by ordering him to stand up and insulting him for being his teacher, but he also turns into a wild animal by threatening him to have him killed. In fact, the image in the last panel is called a "demand image"; in which the gaze of the character "demands that the viewer enters into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her," which is determined by the facial expressions of the represented character" (Kress and Leeuwen 118). This Idrees's menacing, piercing eyes actually seem to be addressing the Western reader saying, "I CAN HAVE YOU KILLED," not just Parvana's father. The Talib's gaze in this close-up, his angry eyebrows and mouth, and even more his teenage moustache that

resembles wild cat's whiskers transform him to a wild animal, creating a direct threat to the viewer, reminiscent of the 9/11 attacks and seem to be demanding military intervention from the Western viewer/soldier. It is worth noting that the name Idress is significant as it means 'The instructor' in Greek. Moreover, Idrees is introduced in the Qur'an as the patient and honest prophet coming after Adam for the guidance of Cain's descendants.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon points out how a colonialist discourse depicts the colonized as wild beasts: "In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms... When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary" (42). These savages are extensively described in the panels of the graphic novel.

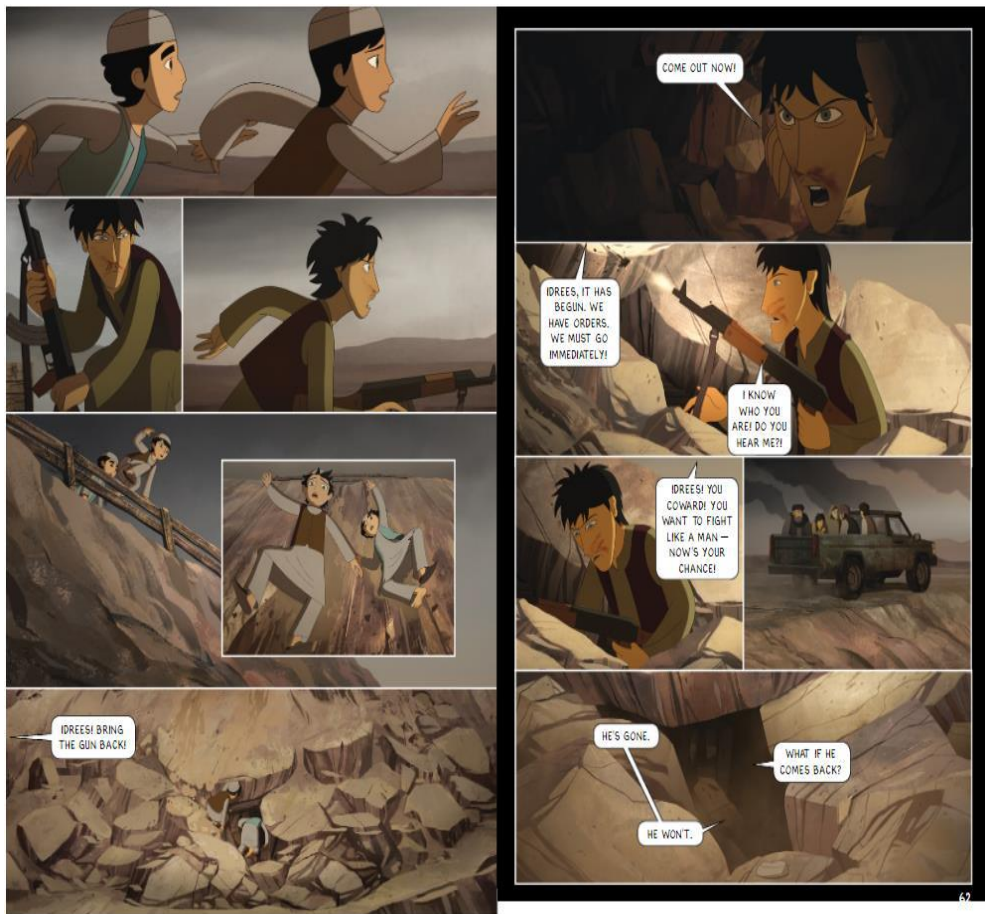


Figure 17, p. 60

This confrontation scene between Parvana and Idrees depicts this Talib as a cannibal. In the first half of the page, Parvana and Shauzia are both chased by Idrees when he recognizes Parvana in the Kiln field. The first panel repeats and reinforces the same image of third world ‘Other’ children who are running for their lives. Desperate for being identified by Idrees as the teacher’s

daughter, she prefers jumping from such a high cliff than being caught by him. The low-angle shot in the third panel adds dramatic height to the background. This worm's-eye view can give the reader a sense that the events he's looking at are larger than life. Nevertheless, in this life-threatening, dramatic scene, Parvana is looking at the reader in the eye while voicelessly screaming for help. This probably signifies the herculean task of saving her that demands a mighty, white savior. Like rats, they have to hide in a hole. These children appear in the last panel in a wide shot that portrays their great escape yet draws the reader's attention to the danger posed by the mountainous nature of this part of the world. The cannibalistic depiction of Idrees is significant as he appears with blood red mustache while holding a gun. His menacing attitude will frighten the reader not only these Afghan children.

In the following silent panels, we see the misery of an oppressed Muslim girl from different angles. These silent panels speak a thousand words.



Figure 18, p. 52

The above figure shows how Parvana loses in this unequal struggle between children and those “maleficent spirits ... leopard-men, serpent-men, six-legged dogs, zombies—a whole series of tiny animals or giants which create around the native a world of prohibitions, of barriers and of inhibitions far more terrifying than the world of the settler” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 55). Just like the Afghans bending over in their trips in the Silk Road, Parvana is losing her childhood and her ability to stand upright. This shot from the back shows the fearful shadow of the prison in the back and a vast desert ahead that she has to cross all by herself. This empty land is “uncultivated, undomesticated, without a legitimate (that is, settled European) owner” (Shohat and Stam 141).

It is worth noting that it is not only girls who need saving; infantilized, ignorant men need saving too, as we see Razaq

whose name signifies giving, but he represents helpless, ignorant Afghans. He appears as a giant with an infant's intelligence.



Figure 19, bottom panel, p. 14

Razaq is first introduced to the reader at the beginning of the graphic novel, where he appears to be clueless and voiceless. As a subaltern, he could not speak in all the panels in which the archetypal Taliban, Idrees, was practicing his utter savagery. Though double this juvenile Talib in size, Razaq looks emotional, helpless and intimidated by Idrees's loud voice too. Hence, as Shohat and Stam point out, "colonialist discourse oscillates between these two master tropes, alternately positing the colonized as blissfully ignorant, pure, and welcoming on the one hand, and on the other as uncontrollably wild, hysterical, and chaotic, requiring the disciplinary tutelage of the law" (143). Indeed, Razaq and Idrees represent the two classical patterns of the colonized.



Figure 20, bottom panel, p. 42

Razaq comes back seeking the help of Parvana's father to read for him a letter. Marginalized and infantilized, he is not even aware that Parvana's father is already imprisoned by Idrees. In the above panels, this supposedly Talib, whose huge figure is juxtaposed with Parvana's tiny one, appears helpless and dependent on little Parvana. Since children are dependent on adults to pass on knowledge, this Talib is doubly infantilized by his dependency on this child and his need for protection while saving Parvana's father at the end of the original novel. Parvana reads him a letter that he has just received, breaking the news of his wife's death. The previous image of an "immature, infantile primitivism" (Nandy 18) of an ignorant Afghan is even reinforced by a feminized representation of an emotional Talib who feels devastated at the news of his wife's death.

At the end of the graphic novel, light comes out of the prison bringing Razaq and Father in the first panel. Nonetheless, in the second panel, Razaq asks Parvana to resume running for her life and her father's. Her crippled father is now infantilized too, putting more burden on this Muslim child. In the third panel, both infantilized men are clearly bleeding. In the fourth panel, in an extreme long shot, Parvana shrinks again in front of the Taliban's prison in an even gloomier image.



Figure 21, p. 75

As seen in the panel below, the end of the graphic novel looks gloomy and dim. The Western positioning of the Afghan identity is reinforced at the end of the graphic novel. Both Parvana and her father, in a demand gaze, are crying for the reader's attention and intervention.



Figure 22, p. 77

This conclusion for the story of Parvana is followed by an exquisite quotation by Rumi in the last page of the graphic novel.

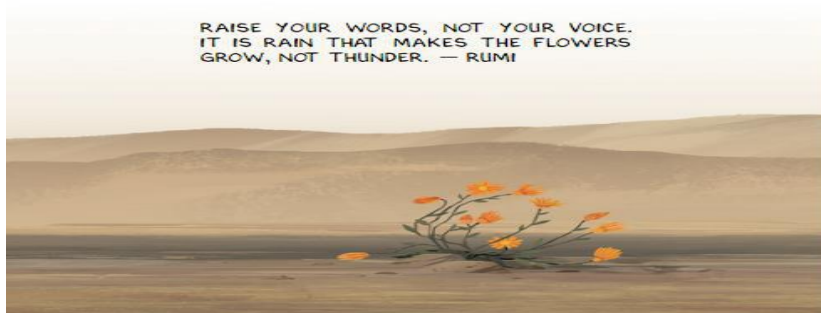


Figure 23, p. 78

Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, also known as Rumi, is a 13th-century Persian poet, whose popular quote points out that a person can have an impact by the wisdom of his words not the level of his voice. Thus, in the last page of the graphic novel, it is stressed that those who speak loudly are heard, but those who speak wisely are listened to. Ironically enough, women in the graphic novel were neither allowed to speak wisely nor loudly. The wilting flowers probably symbolize Parvana and Afghanistan all through the text. They are shown in this last panel as struggling to grow upward.

Findings

On the whole, in Western eyes, in a world of fiction, a third world difference is created and colonization is perpetuated. The Taliban's mandatory *burqa* protruded as the visible evidence of Afghan women's invisible existence in the periphery. Labelled by their blue *burqa*, Afghan women grasped Western feminists' attention and their literary intervention. Both the Taliban's obligatory *burqa* and Western feminists' ethnocentrism subordinate Afghan women. Both erase Afghan women's individuality, homogenizing and oppressing them. Unlike feminist anthropologists who endorse cultural diversity in a global world, the producer of this graphic novel tends to discursively colonize

the cultural heterogeneities of third world women, constructing a monolithic oppressed Afghan woman. Under both *burqa* and Western eyes, Afghan women have neither face nor voice since both obliterate their agency and silence them. In other words, under Western eyes, the Afghan woman is even more deeply in the shadow. Both Western feminists and the Taliban imprison Afghan women in a mandatory *burqa*, and the mesh of the *burqa* are the bars of the prison. These women's imagined/ real objectification by their cultural practices and their patriarchal societies is highlighted in the novel. Nevertheless, displaying Afghan women as prisoner inmates objectifies them to the Western viewer's gaze and, hence, reinforces their objectification to the US cultural hegemony. Without the obligatory *burqa*, the Afghan women could have ended up as a third world woman, struggling without much cry. Exploring all these ideologies in the examined graphic narrative with its different medium specific features added more layers of meanings and other deeper dimensions to the analysis.

Conclusion

In brief, vilifying the veil could be argued to be a part of a whole colonial discourse of culturally demonizing the Orient. The mandatory veil was the ultimate sign of the Taliban's oppression, yet it was only one item in a long list of forms of oppression. In

dominant systems of representation women were victimized by other injustices in a way that constructed the Western feminists as matronizing third world women, while constructing the Western reader as a paternalistic savior of women. This Western feminist discourse on the real/imagined misery of Afghan women could be indicative of what the US administration embedded in its justification for the War on Terror. Hence, Western feminism's conflation with imperialism is inevitable and their non-violent activism brought the longest war in the history of the American States, or rather the longest crusade of liberating women in modern history.

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