A Postcolonial Feminist Study of Suzanne Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree* (2005) and Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing* (2015)

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Abstract

The paper presents a critical approach to the Western colonial discourse in representing non-Western issues, especially the question of third-world Muslim women in Syria and Afghanistan in Suzanne Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree* (2005) and Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing* (2015). Both texts show how women are silenced, marginalized, oppressed, and victimized through culture, history, and geography and how they manage to react and defend their identity to achieve survival and freedom through resistance. The study also highlights the close affinity between displacement and trauma, which affects third-world women's behaviours and actions. The paper examines the consequences of postcolonial intersectionality of gender, class, and religion that faces third-world Muslim women. While Staples introduces those women's stereotyped and subordinated images from a Western perspective, Yazbek reforms the traditional images of the oppressed Syrian women. The paper investigates how each author reconstructs the experiences of the marginalized voices of women through different narrative techniques, such as reconnecting memories in Yazbek's memoir and the transition from one narrator to another in Staples' novel. Finally, the study asserts the importance of the West's understanding of Third World culture, so as not to result in a misunderstanding or misappreciation of Islamic societies' religious or social backgrounds. Following a historical and analytical approach, the paper introduces a brief history of postcolonial feminism, followed by a discourse analysis of both texts in a socio-cultural and religious context.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Yazbek's *The Crossing*, double colonization, displacement and trauma, identity crisis

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Introduction

Postcolonial feminism theory works on incorporating the ideas of indigenous and third-world feminist movements into mainstream Western feminism. It examines how women and men are presented in colonized territories, focusing on the power imbalance between men and subordinated women (McLeod 173; Shital 286). Postcolonial feminism also focuses on patriarchy as a main reason for oppression and investigates how social inequalities are located in and constructed by political, historical, cultural, and economic contexts (Mohanty et al. 45). John McLeod explains that feminism and postcolonialism "share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression" (174). The two approaches examine the marginalization of the "other" by the ruling power, trace the relationship between imperialism and feminism, and evaluate the liberation of women in the third world.[1] Postcolonial feminist critics like Gloria Anzaldua, Chandra Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Gayatri Spivak examine how women are represented in colonial and postcolonial societies and observe the change that occurs in gender relationships. These postcolonial feminists reject the assumption that the standards of white women are the norm (Shital 284) and that third-world women represent "a homogenous, powerless group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty 57). These critics believe that this generalization leads to misunderstanding and underestimation of third-world women whose concerns are not necessarily the same as those of first-world women. Third-world women are subjected to double colonization, gender and race, because of imperialist circumstances, and become dual victims of both indigenous and foreign ideologies of patriarchal hegemony (175). The concept of double colonization was first introduced by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford in their anthology, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing*, which discusses the question of female visibility and their struggles as writers in a mainly male's world. Thus, differences in the first and third worlds produce different problems and responses. Eurocentric/Western writers treat third-world women as the other, ignoring their subjectivity, ideology, and circumstances. Mohanty comments that Western writers neglect the historical, racial exoticism, and cultural differences of third-world women (Mohanty 58). In a recent study, "The Women Activism in Pakistan," Syeda Mehmoona Khushbakht and Munazza Sultana call for an elimination of any borrowed ideas from the Western postcolonial feminist ideology because Western critics ignore both the culture and religion of the non-Western women or third-world Muslim communities (60).

Islamic feminism has become part of the discourse of postcolonial feminism. The Muslim world is repeatedly portrayed through the figure of the colonial harem and oppressed Muslim women.[2] According to the professor and author Umme Al-wazedi, many Muslim women face men's patriarchy, colonial power, Arab family traditions, economic standards, and Islamic tokens (163). Western feminists present the world of third-world Muslim women inferior, silent, and still, and Muslim masculine men are represented as violent, active, and

exterior. The opposing relationship between Western women and third-world Muslim women conveys the false generalization of the otherness of Muslim women's culture and ideology. The hegemonic relationship between first-world feminists and third-world women is a form of neo-orientalism, since without the presence of the second, the first would not exist (Mohanty 82). In *Feminism Without Borders*, Mohanty criticizes Western feminism critics because they believe that first-world women and third-world Muslim women are identical and have comprehensive unity with common concerns and interests (22). This hegemonic tendency of first-world feminists toward third-world Muslim women has various reasons: First, Western feminists think that Islamic traditions and laws are arbitrary and unfair toward Muslim women (Moghadam 40). Western feminists try to support Muslim women and protect them against the supposed arbitrary religious Islamic codes, like the veil and the Muslim masculine authority (41). Second, third-world women do not understand the tenets of first-world political and cultural approaches like feminism and liberalism (Majid 55). Those women accept these approaches despite the different cultural and religious customs of the Western world. Third, some third-world Muslim women lack education, good economic living standards, and effective political roles (Hirsi 58). They are indeed powerless and dependent. Some are not able to speak for themselves and are voiceless. They are afraid of the authority and hegemony of patriarchal men and do not know how to change their circumstances. Thus, some Muslim women and critics, like Fatima Mernissi and Tahar Ben Jelloun, follow the standards of first-world feminism unquestionably (Majid 56; Hirsi 58). They are not able to understand or appreciate their religious or cultural traditions or laws. Some voices of Muslim women writers, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Mona Eltahawy, have rebelled against Islamic codes, like wearing the veil, *hijab*, and charged it with backwardness (Eltahawy; Muhtaseb 9-18). In her book, *The Caged Virgin*, the Somali Ayaan Ali Hirsi referred to Muslim women as "caged virgins" and called for Western political action to save Muslim women from oppressive Muslim culture (59). Such articles release dehumanizing representations of third-world women and legitimize the savior mission of the first-world. In *Native Informants as Regimes of Representation*, Shamsa Birik says: "Their personal accounts have only added impetus to the war on terror contributing to more military aggression in Muslim countries and further authenticating stereotypes of the 'oppressed Muslim woman'" (7). These Western and third-world Muslim voices against Islamic culture fuel neo-colonial agendas and polemic ideology in the third world. Nevertheless, other Muslim writers - like Anouar Majid - defend Islamic feminism which is "democratic, anti-patriarchal and anti-imperialism (56). Majid also criticizes the hegemonic structures of Western global capitalism. To pave the way between the two opposing cultures, Mohanty calls for the possibility of dialogues between them, and believes that what is important is not the intersection of differences nor making the marginalized voices of the third world louder, but rather "how to engage in ethical and caring dialogues (and revolutionary struggles) across the divisions, conflicts, and individualist identity formations that interweave feminist communities" (125). Crossing boundaries is achieved through the willingness to learn from each other, mutual dialogues, and political cooperation through predictable differences and conflicts (Kerner 858). Part of the responsibility also lies on third-world Muslims, men and women, who should explain and interpret their ideology,

culture, traditions, and Islamic conventions to others.

The Consequences of the Historical Background

Postcolonial feminists condemn first-world superiority and reject the third-world sense of inferiority. warns against making Western standards the principal touchstone for the whole world (Dabashi 272). Both Suzanne Staples and Samar Yazbek discuss the cultural legacy of colonialism and its continuing impact of imperialism and the radical construction of gender differences imposed by colonial regimes. The events of *Under the Persimmon Tree* took place after the events of September 11 when the United States claimed war on terrorism and made a military intervention against Taliban forces in Afghanistan.[3] When the American forces interfered in the affairs of Afghanistan, the Afghan Shura Council, which includes more than one thousand Muslim scholars from all over Afghanistan, warned in a fatwa that if the United States disagreed with its decision and invaded Afghanistan, then jihad would become an order for all Muslims (Mullah). The American novelist Staples, among others, seems unable to understand the harmful existence of the American forces in Afghanistan and the Eastern viewpoint of this intervention in the affairs of the third world (Bradford 49). She accepts the colonial presence of Western forces on the Afghanistan land. In *The Crossing*, Samar Yazbek refuses the sovereignty of Al-assad regime over Syria and considers it as internal colonization.[4] She says, "I really thought there were terrorists and I was wholeheartedly determined to defend my country from them, but what happened made me realise the truth. Assad's gang were the terrorists" (150). She only condemns the injustice and persecution of the Syrian government and the brutality of the terrorist group ISIS and some other groups. She forgets the blatant interference of some foreign countries, such as the United States, France, and Iran, their seizure of the country's natural resources, and their control of the crossings and entrances from inside and outside Syria (Mazzett; Rozen; Whitlock; Charbonneau; "Middle east 2013"). Staples also did not mention the consequences of the American intervention in Iraq or blame the United States for the colonial hegemony in the Middle East. She only focuses on the interior terrorism in Afghanistan and demonstrates the plight of colonialism by Taliban forces. Staples repeatedly refers to the Taliban's violent military power to encroach on Afghan territories, without paying attention to the severe influence of the colonial regime of the Americans. Both writers believe in the right of the West to manage the affairs of the East, including women's affairs. In the initial pages of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the narrator, Najmah, says;

> Everyone is frightened of the Taliban and the heartless Pashtun talib who enforce their rules…There are lists of things that are forbidden by the Taliban: playing music, laughing out loud, keeping a bird to hear its song in the morning, putting pictures of beautiful scenes on the walls, reading books, flying kites. We have heard that women wearing henna on their fingertips have had their fingers chopped off. (14)

Najmah, an eyewitness to the havoc in the novel, records the arrival of the Taliban, who demolishes the land, giving the details of recurrent attacks, terrorism, and execution of people.

In such a postcolonial era, many women are exploited by patriarchal oppression, whether sexually or brutally in some areas, for their financial or family needs or as a result of the harsh conditions

of life. Women are abused and labeled as inferior, whereas men are described as superior and patriarchal. Staples depicts many Afghan-Muslim women as marginalized and powerless enough to react against the colonial masculine masters. For example, Najmah's family, especially her mother, Mada-Jan, was so horrified by the Pashtun, and went into a panic attack when the Taliban men decided to take her husband, Baba-Jan, and their son to fight the Americans. Mada-Jan is portrayed as helpless, hopeless, silent, and weak. This stereotyped image is commonly generalized by first-world writers. Staples writes,

> The Pashtun, the talib leader, wav[es] his gun in a menacing way… Mada-jan lies on her side, curled up on the cot ... Her tears pool in the well at the inner corner of her eye, then roll down over her nose and drop onto the quilt beneath her. She doesn't eat, or sleep, or talk, or wipe the tears away. She seems to barely breathe. (26)

Staples uses descriptive language and action words like "roll down," "drop onto," and "wipe" throughout the passage, which help readers to visualize Mada-Jan's submissive status. The detailed description conveys the fragile and devastated feelings of the mother. Najmah also feels worry and gloom before and after migration. She bears the responsibility of her mother while the latter gives birth to her baby. The use of the verb "curled up" implies how her mother is weak and submissive. The imagery, "Her tears pool in the well at the inner corner of her eye" represents a feeling of sympathy towards her submissive mother. Through imagery, diction, and tone, Staples conveys how the death of her mother and the baby changes Najmah's views about life. She takes care of the animals up and down hills, and bears the burden of her tyrannical Uncle who grows poppies in his land and wants to loom her family's land. At the same time, Staples introduces Nusrat, the American citizen, as a savior to third-world Pakistani and Afghan women. She presents the Western voice that has all knowledge and wisdom towards the weak and ignorant Afghan women. She came to Pakistan and abandoned her homeland voluntarily, yet with Western superiority. Staples says; "She has been teaching them the poetry of numbers, and about the dance of the planets and stars in the heavens. They're better now about sitting still, but in comparison to the children Nusrat taught in America, these are a challenge" (46). Although Staples sympathizes with third-world refugees, she admits their inferiority to Western people. In her article "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1987), Gayatri Spivak objects to the feminist intellectual approach of Western liberalism, and later in her essay "Can the subaltern talk?" (1988) argues that Western feminists have deprived third-world women of their authentic voices, even if they sympathize with them and speak about their rights (271-313). Spivak challenges the idea of Western colonizers' superiority over colonized people and asserts that the position of marginalized subalterns, especially women, despite colonial authority, does not override its systematic impact. In *The Crossing*, Yazbek introduces the atrocities of the patriarchal suppression and colonization against Syrian women. She says,

> Diana had been hit in the spinal cord by a bullet, causing permanent paralysis. She lay there frozen, like a panic-stricken rabbit. It seemed a miracle that her small, fragile body hadn't been completely blown apart under the impact. The little girl had been crossing the street to buy a pastry for breakfast when it happened. What on earth was the sniper thinking when he aimed his

> sights on her back? In the hospital bed next to Diana was Shaima, whose leg had been blown off by a shell, and whose left hand had been shattered by shrapnel. Her other foot was also injured and wounds covered her body. She and her family had been taken by surprise as they sat in front of their house. Nine members of her family were killed, including her mother. (13)

The horrible stories of killing and bombing women's bodies show the massive impact of the colonial regime of Al-assad's troops. Yazbek portrays the women who are trapped in a cycle of violence. This is illustrated by the use of interrogative questions and violent words, "shattered," "paralysis," and "blown apart." The author conveys the harsh reality of life on the frontier and the continuous danger of political colonization, which keeps readers involved in actions. Yezbek crosses back into ruined Syria through Turkey three times after 2011. As a third-world writer, she meets various individuals from different places in Syria and lets them speak up about their horror stories. As a refugee, Yazbek goes back to hell to show and speak about the grim and horrible situation. Nevertheless, being a woman in a colonial patriarchal territory is refused, "whenever I [Yazbek] travelled back to Syria, most men couldn't resist mentioning the fact that I'm a woman, and that this was no place for a woman" (*The Crossing* 44). Although Yazbek met ordinary people from the Free Army, she had no chance to meet or interview the leaders or fighters of the Shabihas, fighters of Assad's regime or non-Syrian terrorist sects, the Nusra Front, al-Qa'da, and ISIS because she is a woman, which means she might be killed, raped, or arrested. She speaks with a young man who starts talking about his refusal to rape a girl under the pressure and order of his senior officer. Consequently, his genitals are shot off as a punishment. People are trapped between a brutal and determined regime and equally atrocious Jihadi sects, who feed on the desperation of the Syrians. One of Yazbek's friends says: "The next phase is going to be harder because these groups will have more influence and will emerge ... stronger and more violent" (46). Through documenting her three visits to Syria, Yazbek narrates the stories of different oppressed characters from within. Time and place create a live portrayal of these humiliating events. In these colonial circumstances, women live in disastrous conditions. They face different levels of colonial and patriarchal oppression. For example, a sixteen-year-old girl loses her legs when a shell hits her, and her sister is deafened by a shell landing near her (58). Many Syrian women are also abused financially by men, "I [Yazbek] told Abu Waheed about Abu Mostafa stealing his wife's aid money. He laughed. I could not laugh" (58). On her third perilous crossing in July 2013, she found that ISIS is a well-established group of hired killers in northern Syria. The extremist jihadists reached deep into the society and married the widows of the ceased rebels. This double colonization reflects the devastating attitude of the colonial power toward women, who are ruled over by patriarchal oppressors.

Displacement Crisis and Trauma Tensions

Displacement is one of the most crucial postcolonial results that expresses the different cultural consequences of colonization, especially on women. It is also the result of the historic disconnection between colonies and metropolises (Boehmer 6). There are about two and a half million Afghan refugees in the world, of whom 2.2 million are in Iran and Pakistan alone (*The UNHCR Refugee Agency: Afghanistan Situation* 2024). Three and a

half million Afghans are internally displaced. They have fled their homes, searching for refuge within the borders of the country. Syria also represents the largest displacement crisis in the world. More than thirteen million people have fled from the country or are displaced inside its borders, and about five and half million Syrian refugees are displaced in the neighbouring countries (*The UNHCR Refugee Agency: Syrian Situation* 2024*).* Displacement is often associated with diaspora, migration, and minority spaces and increases the feeling of homelessness among native peoples (Boehmer 6). Consequently, migration becomes an escape from insecurity, instability, violence, lack of water and food, poor health conditions, and pollution (Miller & Rasmussen 4). These severe circumstances can lead to traumatic psychological instability, which affects people's behaviours and actions. Through narrating and documenting refugees' stories, Staples and Yazbek, reflect violent attempts by colonial regimes to excise the history of indigenous natives. The Americans, Taliban forces, and colonial regime of Al-assad impose displacement and colonization on native Afghan and Syrian people, who are subjected to structural violent domination and suppression. This destructive atmosphere compels people to migrate and settle in new places. The main characters, Najmah and Yazbek, are displaced from their native homes, Afghanistan and Syria, and marginalized in a refugee camp and exile. These circumstances put them under huge pressure of double colonization of gender and race. The two refugees become objects and victims of violence, wars, and economic hardships. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Najmah describes her escape from Northern Afghanistan to Pakistan with her neighbours, Khalida and Akhtar, trying to avoid violence, exploitation, abuse, rape, and killing.

> The women, children, and elders from all over these hills are crossing over into Pakistan and the refugee camps at Torkhum. Everyone is hungry … As we walk through the mountains, our feet slip over rocks and we have to hold on to each other to keep from falling off the trail and into the steep ravine on our downhill side. Intermittently clouds roll over the sky, obscuring the moon and the stars, and we walk with our hands on the boulders on the other side of the trail, some of which are the size of houses and hang precipitously over our heads. (68-72)

Staples employs a poetic style that shows Afghanistan's vast, rugged landscapes. Her prose is full of vivid imagery and symbolism, creating a rich, evocative atmosphere and reflecting her characters' intense feelings. Using descriptive words and a sad tone reflect people's frustration and loss. Postcolonial feminists shed light on the atrocious influence of displacement on women, dislocating them from their native homes and marginalizing them in refugee camps and ineligible places. This involuntary displacement often causes significant psychological distress as a result of the sudden loss of home, community, and a sense of security. Displaced individuals commonly experience mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety. In *The Crossing*, after detention and beating, the Alawite Syrian journalist, Yazbek, is forced into exile in France at the hands of Al-assad's regime. Although she is forced to abandon her home, culture, tradition, and language, she could not forget them. She feels lost and anxious between the two places, Syria and France, so she makes three journeys from exile to home. She asks herself, "What was she doing here? Confronting existence? Identity? Exile?

Justice? The insanity of bloodshed?" (*The Crossing* 11), and adds,

> I told them about sneaking through the barbed wire to the other side. How we had crossed from being lost in one wilderness to being lost in another. It had been a moment of oscillation, of teetering on the line between exile and homeland. There, on both sides of the fence, bodies suddenly emerged from the darkness, shoulders rubbing as they shuffled blindly on … We crept by stealthily, like cats in the shadows. The border beneath which Syrians disappear in the night is just a hair's breadth: no distance to speak of. People go in, people come out; they traverse this distance in the peaceful still of night, although few will find peace at their destination. (14)

Yazbek sheds light on the psychological damage people have to endure in their quest for survival, "I was surrounded once more by the swarming crowds of terrified humans desperate to escape" (209). Her ability to convey the severe reality of life on the frontier and the constant presence of danger creates a tense, foreboding atmosphere that keeps readers engaged and on edge. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. Displaced people lose their identities, hopes, and lives while crossing borders. The use of vivid imagery including simile and metaphor enriches the narrative and deepens the emotional and psychological feelings of the characters. Dislocation deprives refugees and forced migrants of the basics of life, such as shelter, food, and other basic services, and victimizes them for the next generations. In such colonial and postcolonial territories, individuals are obliged to leave their homes while others return as a healing process for their psychological traumas. Women are surrounded by collective trauma and patriarchal suppression. The concept of cultural trauma reflects collective pain where women use the mechanism of narration as a therapeutic technique to mirror social oppression (Schreiber 4). For example, the feelings of homesickness and nostalgia lead Syrian writers to document and record individuals' testimonies in autobiographies or memoirs that embrace the Syrian trauma. In her memoir, Yazbek cannot escape from her harsh feelings and thoughts. She says:

> I'd find myself tumbling into a deep and futile pit of emptiness that nothing could rescue me from except the prospect of returning to Syria. Then I'd come back here and live with the revolutionaries and the ordinary civilians, and be struck by a sense of despondency and anger at the great injustice that had fallen on us as a people and a cause. (12)

Yazbek's memoir becomes a traditional vehicle for transmitting traumatic experiences into a fictional medium that removes the "generic boundaries between history, fiction, [and] documentary" (Wang & Vasvàri 2). The writer gives various snapshots of disabled and paralyzed women, children, and soldiers. Their painful stories embody existential and culturally alienated selves. Yazbak says, "The most we could dream of was to wake up in the morning and discover we weren't buried beneath rubble, or that we had avoided having our heads cut off at the hands of ISIS" (253). The terrorist groups also impose patriarchal dominance and colonization over women, who lose their identities and values. Yazbek documents the emergence of ISIS, the Free Army, and the Nusra Front. The testimonies of deformed characters reflect their agonies, helplessness, and hopelessness. Those people feel that the world has abandoned them. Because of the revolution (2011), civil

war, assaults, and violence, people had to join battalions and brigades or were caught in fundamentalist factions, composed mostly of non-Syrians. On her third crossing, she managed to meet one of Ahrar al-Sham's militant groups, which has ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. He, the Hajii, told her that the conflict in Syria had become a religious war, where genocide, an important weapon of war, would last for decades. Trauma implies the collectivization of social pain, or the negative affective response to displacement, rejection, exclusion, and isolation from the homeland. The individual social pain is transformed into collective social trauma and traumatic collective identity.

Besides, displacing women from their native homes imposes self-exile on them in newly located areas. Many dislocated women are raped, killed, and sold by colonizers or refugee smugglers. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Afghan women are displaced from Afghanistan and relocated to various new places. Some of them are disintegrated in Pakistan because of the troubled circumstances, while others stay within the country under the tyranny of the Taliban militants and American forces. Nevertheless, over time, displaced refugees feel nostalgia and homesickness (Shehzadi 5). They consider home a place where one has a remembrance, and without it, one cannot have a real relationship to a place. And it is a place which, if left once, is difficult to attain and is impossible to return to. Home loss is devastating, so people create home in their memories and imagination as a compensatory technique that enables dwelling on the pain of their loss (Porter 303). In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, after Najmah escapes from Taliban forces and crosses the border to Pakistan, she misses her home and remembers her happy memories in her home. She shares a kind of collective memory with all migrants. By using first-person narration and retelling those past memories, Yazbek also gives an accurate historical picture of the devastating life in Syria, a chronicle of the civil war that destroyed the country. These collective memories shape the traumatized history of the colonized and post-colonized societies. In *The Crossing*, Yazbek sees exile in a new perspective for the new circumstances, "Even in exile, people today were no longer cut off with such finality from their places of origin. Instead, those places remained present and accessible in so much as it was still possible to interact online with those left behind and communicate about events as they happened" (213). Despite poverty, homelessness, and terrorism, exile is less devastating than it was before because of modern technology. Thus, she decides to take part and make little changes, going back to Syria to help her people:

> But, having arrived in France, I'd felt compelled to return to northern Syria, to fulfil my dream of achieving democracy and freedom in my homeland. This return to the country of my birth was all I ever thought about, and I believed in doing what was right as an educated person and a writer, standing alongside my people in their cause. My goal was to set up some small-scale women's projects and an organisation aimed at *empowering* women and providing children with an education. (11)

After being displaced by the colonial regimes, Yazbek returns to her homeland with a strong wish to reclaim her society and identity. She wants the whole world to know about the miseries in Syria and defends her country regardless of the consequences. She says, "I write, with fumbling fingers. I exist in the real world … I am the storyteller who considers your short lives, who holds you in her Gaze… I am writing for you: the

betrayed" (7). Yazbek uses the first-person pronoun, 'I,' for her as a narrator to assert her established identity and deserved position of authority. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Nusrat also introduces education to those young refugees, who are forced to bear arms or work in poppy lands for high income. She comments that "without some education, these children will be lost forever" (56). In The Persimmon Tree School, under the orientation and supervision of Nusrat, boys and girls go to learn, eat delicious food, and share and discuss ideas. Despite the devastating impact of displacement and exile, both writers were able to create hope and a new opportunity to coexist with the psychologically exhausting reality from the ordeal.

Western and Third-World Problematic Conventions

The dilemma in post-colonial and feminist writing arises from celebrating Western female subjects and neglecting the true essence of third-world women's issues (Spivak 1985, 242-261). In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Nusrat's ideas still represent American superiority through which she can exchange the lives of non-Western women and children, giving authority to Western values. For example, she believes that without her help to the widow Amina, one of her students, she would not have survived: "I didn't know what would become of Amina and me until I came to the Persimmon Tree School. Now I know what will become of me. I will become a teacher like you" (175). Postcolonial feminists, like ALM Riyal, believe that Western sympathy with third-world native women is an act of colonization and only satisfies the interest of Western women (Riyal 1). They become a project for Western feminism (Gandhi 85-86). Besides, Nusrat's actions and responses reinforce Western misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the role of Islamic laws and customs toward Muslim women. Nusrat insists on having her own house near the refugee camps so she can keep her school open for Afghan children who have been displaced from their homes. Varga-Dobai says, "Nusrat in this sense fulfills a double role: as a person who cares for the fate of the Afghani women, she embraces the role of a savior and reinforces the Western/non-Western woman binary oppositions" (3). The symbols of the meteor shower and the solar system produce a context for cross-cultural negotiations. For example, Nusrat and her Afghan pupils narrate stories of cultural beliefs about the stars and their properties. One of her pupils tells her that his fundamentalist uncle says that the idea of the solar system Nusrat teaches is "un-Islamic" (76). This thought reflects the contrast between the developed Western and the supposed primitive Muslim worldviews. The other example is when Nusrat tells Sultan and Jamshed, members of her husband's family, to watch a meteor at the ground of her house, they immediately agree. Yet, Asmaa and Fatima, her sister-in-law and mother-in-law, refuse to follow her because it is a bad omen in their old Pakistan traditions. Nusrat's reaction reflects her Western ideology and beliefs, deploring the two women's attitudes and commenting astonishingly that they are "well-educated women" (49). Fatima explains that being educated does not mean she rejects their traditions, folklore, or myths. Her reply critiques of Westerners' inability to comprehend the complexity of culture and tradition in women's lives across cultures.

In *The Crossing*, Yazbek does not have this sense of Western superiority and wants the whole world to know about the miseries in Syria. Her goal is to establish democratic civil institutions and make projects for women in order to empower

them. Through her voice, she focuses on the problems and solutions in Syria, saying;

> I wanted to show them how a woman's freedom lies in a life lived responsibly, which was the opposite of what Syrian society conceived women's liberation to be, viewing it instead as a chaotic violation of customs and traditions. I talked to them about how I'd lived and worked hard to raise my daughter, to be economically independent after my divorce from my husband. (12)

As a third-world Muslim woman, Yazbek introduces herself as a strong feminist and national voice despite the humane catastrophe in Syria. Words such as "liberation" and "independent" describe the tasks that the narrator wants to achieve. The use of factual language, not symbolic nor imaginative, mirrors the internal feelings, thoughts, and actions of the speaker. She rejects the marginalized and victimized depiction of the third-world woman, and affirms to herself, her people, and Western society that she has a radical role in her society.

Religious Codes in Western and Non-Western Ideologies

Third-world Muslim women face different layers of colonization, colonial authority, patriarchal oppression, and cultural and religious misconceptions. A crucial consequence of colonialism is the suppression of women's bodies and shapes. For example, third-world women are not allowed to use their physical appearance in a way that contradicts first-world/ Western norms, which reject the shape of the veil. Western ideology cannot understand the reasons behind wearing the veil. Nevertheless, the issue of the veil and burqa is informed by the ideology and politics of specific times and places. The reasons why women wear veils across Muslim societies are "as varied, multiple, complex, and shifting … as the women themselves" (Ahmed 164). Women wear the veil or burqa for different reasons (Abu-Lughod 786). First, it is a symbol of chastity, morals, and values in Islam. Second, the veil is Muslim women's traditional dress code that reflects their religion. Third, women are not able to take the veil or burqa off in places like Afghanistan or Syria because of their desert and mountainous nature. Fourth, women wear the veil or burqa, fearing terrorists and militant groups including Taliban forces, "In some parts of Aleppo, ISIS actively enforced it. After ISIS seized the city of Raqqa on the banks of the River Euphrates in the north-east, women had to cover their faces and bodies completely in black" (*The Crossing* 163). The two texts suppose the role of physical shape in suppressing women, especially with the spread of extremist religious groups and armed terrorists. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, when Asmaa, Nusrat's sister-in-law, goes out of her home without a veil in Pakistan, a militant, a Pashtun talib, attacks her because she violates the dress code of the veil. He wants to take her to the Ministry of the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue. In *The Crossing*, Syrian women had the freedom to choose whether to wear veils or not according to their own convictions before the presence of the terrorists. Yazbek says,

> Although most women in the conservative countryside wore a veil, there were also unveiled women in the region. In fact, before the war and the presence of ISIS (also known as Islamic State or ISIL) and other militant groups, it had been very normal to see uncovered women in Syria. I kept my head uncovered at the rally because I wanted to feel like I was in the land I knew and loved. (21)

The situation has changed with the presence of different sects and terrorists, who force Syrian women to wear the veil as the first plan to establish what is called the Islamic State. For example, Najmah and Yazbek have to disguise themselves in the shape of a man and a boy and cover their hair in order not to be recognized, raped, or killed while crossing the borders. Yazbeck says, "Any woman without a veil was liable to prosecution and any activist, male or female, risked abduction, murder or arrest" (181). The issue of the burqa or veil reflects the ideology and traditions of Islamic society, the colonizers' oppression of women, or the harsh mountainous nature of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.

In her essay, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?", Lila Abu-Lughod deconstructs the Western perception of Muslim women. She refuses the Western "moral crusades" (81) that intend to save Muslim women, and believes that Western feminists should recognize the third world from the inside and be aware of Islamic values and culture (4). Islam urges wearing a hair veil and honoring women, not strengthening men's authority or oppression over them. Abu-Lughod rejects the superiority and generalization of Western criteria, since they lack an authentic understanding of Islamic teachings and cultural norms. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, Staples introduces the issue of veiling and the burqa as an obstacle that devalues Muslim women. She stresses the negative value of the burqa: "In the cool autumn weather, Nusrat forgets how suffocating the folds of the burqa's synthetic fabric can be in hot weather, and how peering through the crocheted latticework eyepiece can feel like looking through the bars of prison" (21). For Staples, wearing the burqa has a psychological burden lurking in her mind. Najmah says,

> Suddenly I understand. Since I'm not quite of an age when I must cover my head, I am used to looking at the world unhampered by yards and yards of fabric. Khalida is used to being invisible under a burqa to shield her from the eyes of strangers whenever she leaves her house. Even though she looks like a boy of about the same age as Nur, she doesn't feel comfortable without the veil. (60)

The narrator objects to the experience of wearing the burqa and further enhances the Western/non-Western binary oppositions. The words, "unhampered" and "invisible" suggest her suppressed, lost, or fake identity. In *The Crossing*, although she is a Muslim, Yazbeck does not value the religious symbolism of the veil; she is not also fasting during Ramadan (*The Crossing* 165). Her manner is partially due to her rebellion against political events and religious teachings or, perhaps, the liberal standards of the Syrian society that existed before the appearance of ISIS and the entrance of foreign forces into Syria. Unlike in Afghanistan or Pakistan, the Syrian culture accepted unveiled women. Yazbek wears the veil only to pass through borders, fearing that terrorists may recognize her identity, as a woman and an Alawite member, and kill or rape her.

Researchers and critics of Postcolonial feminism should not completely oppose or reject Western criticism or interference in third-world feminists' issues for many reasons. First, this clash between the two cultures leads to critical consciousness and an awareness of the differences between these communities. Authentic understanding and representation become obvious after struggle, misconception, and misrepresentation of others' voices. The coexistence and collaboration between Western/non-Western feminisms are the only ways to guarantee

mutual support in the face of colonial structures. Following the postcolonial feminist approach, there is a need to reconsider the judgments against third-world Muslim women and to look at them as real people and ask them to speak about their thoughts and hopes, rather than imposing Western assumptions on their behalf. In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the relationship between Najmah and Nusrat thematizes the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures, the first and third-world women. At some point, Nusrat's home becomes the desirable end of Najmah's journey. For example, Nusrat hides Najmah from her uncle when he searches for her to be under his patriarchal control. The novel suggests that Najmah requires American intervention and support to survive. Nusrat does not return to America to reconcile with her family. She prefers to stay in Pakistan, perhaps, to honor the name of her beloved husband by building a school (Bradford 57). Nevertheless, Staples creates in some situations a relationship of balance and solidarity between the American woman, who converts to Islam and has a powerful voice, and the Muslim woman, who seeks liberation and rejects colonialization. Through the conflicting events, Staples shows the two perspectives of Najmah and Nusrat as they struggle with the outcomes of colonization and subjection. Through the descriptions of their tragic lives, readers feel a sense of sympathy for both characters. They support each other as they have a shared fear of loss, loneliness, and longing for love. Najmah says, "One night I go out to keep her [Nusrat]company. I hesitate because I don't want to intrude on her ... I am too sad, knowing that it will never again be as it once was" (153). The two characters share the same feelings of fear and sympathy; they hope that they can meet people who they love. Nusrat waits for her Pakistani Muslim husband, Fayz, who has left home to Afghanistan to help patients as he is a doctor. In the end, although Fayz dies in Afghanistan, Nusrat prefers to stay in Pakistan surrounded by harsh living standards, leaving her American family. The events that the two female characters are exposed to are universal female subjects. Their relationship, which provides a kind of solidarity and sustainability, is what people need in a postcolonial feminist society.

Conclusion

Postcolonial feminism decolonizes power relations and representations of trans-cultural relationships, investigates anti-colonial powers and anti-imperial consequences, and examines the differences between women in the first and third worlds with various socio-economic and political circumstances. Postcolonial feminists are now aware of Western feminists' tendency to generalize about third-world women, which is a form of colonial approach. They call for writing history based on these women's particular experiences and survival strategies. The writers, Staples and Yazbek, expose how women are stereotyped, marginalized, and subjugated to double colonization, gender and race. While Staples introduces the stereotyped and subordinated images of those women from a Western perspective, Yazbek reconstructs the traditional image of the oppressed Syrian women from a third-world viewpoint.

Postcolonial feminists also condemn women's exposition to layers of colonization, which lead to various problematic issues like displacement and trauma. The psychological effects of displacement on women's identities continue for the next generations. Displaced women experience high rates of depression and anxiety as a result of the circumstances they faced during their migration. As for Najmah and Yazbek, they create home in their imagination and memoirs as a

therapeutic mechanism to compensate for the loss of their homes. Tracing the severe journey of the two women, who fled from Afghanistan and Syria to refugee camps and exile, Najmah and Yazbek are forced to leave their homes at the hands of internal and external colonizers. They share the same feelings of trauma and collective memory. Although both characters escape across the borderlands and face marginalization, segregation, and vulnerability, they prefer to return to their homes after dislocation. The homecoming motif in both texts becomes a source of relief and healing from colonial traumas.

Furthermore, the third-world female characters introduce varied postcolonial experiences. The dialogues between those women express their personal, political, historical, and geographical experiences and circumstances, changing the general Western assumptions of the superiority of first-world women and the backwardness of third-world women. Without such a conflict and opposing ideologies and cultures, the indigenous women would not have the voices to speak up about their real identities and issues. Opposing the colonial and patriarchal power, Najmah and Yazbek, mainly victims, prove that they have the power to speak, survive, and hope for a new future. Staples tries to make a compromise between the first and third-world ideologies, yet presents the stereotyped version of first and third-world women. Voices such as Yazbek are needed to challenge and correct the old exclusion of third-world women. She makes decisions, crosses borders, and deals with colonizers and colonized.

Although the First World and the Third World have different views on different issues, the contradictions ultimately lead to the formation of self and societal awareness of each society's history, religion, and culture. Instead of blaming Muslim Afghan women for their cultural and religious values, like wearing the veil, Western feminists should call for peace and education for women by objecting to war and colonization. It is better to direct the energy of the First and Third World to reject the forms of global injustice to which women are exposed than to question the principles of religion. Through the situations to which the female heroines in the two texts are exposed, readers understand that issues of religion and culture are only linked to the geography of the place, cultural legacies, traditions, politics, security, and history.

Notes

[1] The third world includes developing countries - Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It also symbolizes the historical and cultural oppression of those countries. Third-World peoples follow different religions, basically Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

[2] The "Colonial Harem" concept presents a historical analysis of Eastern imagery portraying Muslim women. For example, during the colonial period, the veil was used as a way to conceal weapons and resist colonial domination, while also protecting the cultural identity of indigenous people. Additionally, colonial culture often portrayed Muslim women in a sexualized manner, using their bodies and veils to assert dominance and power over third-world populations. See Alloula 35-43.

[3] According to the *Costs of War Project* at Brown University, the war has killed 176,000 people in Afghanistan: 46,319 civilians, 69,095 military and police officers, and at least 52,893 Taliban fighters. According to the United Nations, after the 2001 invasion, more than 5.7 million former refugees returned to Afghanistan. See *Costs of War* 2021.

[4] According to the *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (SNHR), 227,749 civilians have been killed from March 2011 until now. Half of Syria's population, which was 23 million at the start of the conflict, have been forced to flee their homes. Of those, 5.5 million are living as refugees in the region, mostly in Turkey, as reported by the UN's refugee UNHCR. Hundreds of thousands are scattered across 130 countries, while 6.7 million have been displaced inside the country, including an estimated 2.5 million children.

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