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DECOLONIAL FEMINISM AND DIASPORA: ISSUES OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE POETRY OF RUPI KAUR AND FATIMAH ASGHAR

Roshan Amber Ali[a]* and Saima Umer[b]

[a b] *Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.*
*roshan.amber@numl.edu.pk, saima.umer@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which poetic works by South Asian women in diaspora incorporate feminist themes that challenge boundaries of race, class and gender defined by colonial frameworks. The study makes an argument for an approach that challenges the Eurocentric feminist and literary canon by drawing on Chandra Mohanty's "Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity." The theoretical underpinnings provide an intersectional approach to decolonization interlinking issues of race, gender and class as presented in the selected poetry of Rupi Kaur from "the sun and her flowers" and Fatimah Asghar from "If They Come for Us". The paper argues its way towards amplifying South Asian diasporic voices that represent experiences of marginalized populations and counter the dominance of Western feminism.

Keywords: Decolonial feminism, diaspora, South Asian poetry, Intersectionality.

Introduction

Feminist discourse from the Global South has been at the periphery of mainstream discursive practices until the last few decades. South Asian feminist scholarship began to gain traction with works from scholars including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sharmila Rege, Kamla Bhasin, Sarah Suleri, Arundhati Roy and Naila Kabeer. These scholars have criticized White feminism for considering women of color as monoliths and neglecting the monumental impact of colonial legacy on the lives non-white. Decolonial feminism challenges the discourse that upholds the central position of white men as ontological absolutes. It acknowledges the parallel forces of imperial and patriarchal hegemonies used to disenfranchise women from South Asia. Consequently, decolonizing feminism is a necessary yet cumbersome undertaking as the intersections of race, class and gender are pertinent to understand the multifaceted oppression of women in this region.

In this context, South Asian women writers exert a significant influence in challenging dominant narratives of marginalization by reshaping boundaries and power structures, especially in terms of gender equality (Hussein and Hussain 2021). They believe that local, indigenous feminist thought and practice is pertinent to thoroughly address the issues that South Asian women, particularly women from the Indian subcontinent, face (Loomba and Lukose 2012). In this regard, South Asian diasporic poetry provides diverse insight reflects the complexities of navigating their identities and sense of belonging in the context of racial, gendered, and cultural dynamics embedded in

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their background of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal (Clini & Valančiūnas 2021; Zhang 2000). Although the authenticity of diasporic literary representation is often questioned by natives, immigrants maintain an association with their homeland and with each other through shared history, identity, and experiences in the destination country (Imran 2019). Their experiences and identities are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including their cultural heritage, the legacy of colonial rule and the ongoing impacts of globalization and migration. South Asian women in diaspora have used their writing to tackle issues of sexuality, domestic violence, class discrimination, and religious conflicts. Many use their writing as a means of resistance against anti-migrant laws by incorporating their experiences in countries like the UK (Imran 2019). Furthermore, the impact of globalization is noteworthy as it has increased visibility and interconnectedness of South Asian diasporic communities while also redefining feminism beyond cultural or national borders (Dasgupta 2003).

Consistent with this perspective and building on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, development of indigenous feminism pertains to understanding the intersectional inequalities of gender, race, class, education, sexuality, religion, culture and ability. While a decolonial approach offer some benefits, it risks repetition and redundancy of the same binaries it attempts to deconstruct which diverts the focus from contemporary feminist issues (Suleri 1992). The challenge lies in balancing deconstruction of binaries and establishment of new, inclusive frameworks that can effectively address the hybrid experiences of South Asian women in diaspora. Instead of replacing one set of binaries with another, decolonization should focus on creating a space that embraces fluidity and complexity. Therefore, it is key to form a nuanced awareness of these limitations while focusing on the transformational potentialities of intersectional theorizing (Mane 2012).

Methodology

This paper draws on a theoretical lens grounded in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity" (2003) which necessitates a decolonized feminism to address contemporary manifestations of colonial and patriarchal oppression, that is free from exclusions and silences created by colonial boundaries or geographical borders (2003, 2). Mohanty develops an anti-capitalist and anti-racist critique rooted in a solidarity based on social realities beyond metaphorical concepts of sisterhood or sense of shared identity. It is both a political and an ethical goal. To the core, Mohanty's feminist ideology can be described as a "pro-sex and -woman" world-view, where both genders can freely and safely live their lives, with physical health and self-respect; with the liberty to choose whoever they want to love and live with, to have or not have children; not just to make decisions under obligation, but with pleasure and imagination to explore the mind; with financial stability, racial impartiality, environmental sustainability, and restructuring of capital to form material foundation of human welfare (3).

The poems have been taken from works by Rupi Kaur and Fatimah Asghar who are South Asian women in diaspora from India and Pakistan, respectively. Rupi Kaur and Fatimah Asghar voice their personal struggles in their poetry while also contemplating the common experiences of misogyny rooted in racial, cultural and classist discriminations against South Asian immigrant women. This research employs Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis drawn from "Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide" (2022) that provides a step-by-step introduction to the thematic analysis method. The method of analysis includes identification, evaluation, categorization, explanation and commentary

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on the themes that are found in the text. It helps analyze the data, recognize patterns that contribute to themes, identify the themes and analyze the themes by relating them to codes from the data (Macguire & Delahunt 2017).

For the purpose of this study, three major themes have been identified in Table 1 below and Mohanty's theoretical framework has been used to determine thematic codes.

Theme: Decolonizing Feminist Voices and Experiences	**Theme: Exploring Racial Bias**	**Theme: Anti-Capitalist Critique**
• Explore ideas beyond borders of race, class, sexuality, nationality and ethnicity. • Differentiating experiences from white women • Identify colonial influence on history and experiences • Revisions and rewriting experiences and colonial history.	• Acknowledge sexism and misogyny faced by women of color. • Recognize the role of racial bias in social and political systems The ways in which race affects every day experiences of Third World women	• Effects of economic and social marginalization on justice or privilege • Underlying capitalist agendas coinciding with colonial patterns and missions

Table 1: Thematic codes based on Mohanty's "Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity"

Exploring Issues of Race, Class, and Gender in the Poetry of Rupi Kaur and Fatimah Asghar

Decolonizing Feminist Voices and Experiences

Decolonization is a complex undertaking for South Asian immigrants as they navigate their own traumas and the generational trauma from their parents stemming from colonial histories. In her poem "Partition", Fatimah Asghar underscores the impact of the partition of the Indian sub-continent which disrupted national identities of South Asians owing to a legacy of colonialism where "no one remembers the road that brings you back" (2018, 9). The colonial strategy of divide and rule along with forced assimilation led erasure of regional Kashmiri, Seraiki, Indian and Pakistani identities in diaspora. Asghar exposes the underlying racist stereotypes,

> you're a Kashmiri until they burn your home. take your orchards. stake a different flag…you're indian until they draw a border through Punjab…you're pakistani until your classmates ask what that is. then you're indian again. or some *kind of spanish*.

Furthermore, colonial linguistic hegemony forces local populations to speak English in order to assimilate in Western settings. As a result, immigrants abandon their ancestral languages to the extent that their own languages are only recognizable when they hear their relatives speak (9). Erasure of personal and collective histories fractures their identities complicating their relationship with the past and the present. Her poem "Oil" reveals the neocolonial strategy of alienating South Asians from their culture as South Asians women have been "stripped (of their) saris & clips" and estranged from their native language to the extent that it sounds strange on her own tongue. Moreover, in

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"Paritition" Asghar incompatibility of Western and Eastern aspects of diasporic existence that clash when,

> you're a virgin until you get too drunk. you're a muslim until you're not a virgin. you're a pakistani until they start throwing acid. you're a muslim until it's too dangerous. you're safe until you're alone. you're american until the towers fall. until there's a border on your back (9).

Along the same lines, Asghar draws attention to the internal conflict immigrants confront when interrogated about their nationality. She takes stylistic liberty in her poem "From" written in tabular form depicting the discrimination and alienation faced by non-white people in the West.

What They Say	How They Say It	What They Actually Mean
Where are you from?	A short cut to the end, could be a period. a lovesong if they weren't locking a drone on target.	You must not be from here. So, where are you from?
آپ کہاں سے ہیں؟	Aap kahaa se hai?	There is a wrong answer
आप कहां से हैं	Aap kahaa se hai?	There is a wrong accent
تسیں کتھوں ہو؟	Tusi kitho ho?	How did you forget? How will you remember?

Table 2: Fatimah Asghar's poem titled "From" (2018, 27) is originally written in tabular form.

The anonymous interrogator assumes a hostile stance when asking where the person is from since they clearly "must not be from here" because they speak South Asian regional languages. The bias originates from visual similarities between Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi speaking South Asians as they have brown skin. Colonial bias neglects the ethnic, regional and linguistic diversity of South Asia. Post-colonial recolonization created fundamentalist movements that foregrounded boundaries of nationalism, race, ethnicity and religion within the colonized communities (Mohanty 2003, 2-3).

She contemplates the possibility to reconnect with precolonial identities and the idea of "home" in an attempt of reconciliation between the past and the present. Asghar further deconstructs colonial influences that shape her identity in the poem "Oil" (49). She describes the difficulties immigrant women face in when trying to separate the pre-colonial and post-colonial influences on their identities. She describes living with her relatives as "not-blood but could be" as they took responsibility for her wellbeing after the death of her parents. She portrays her Auntie A who "runs oil through (her) scalp" in their house that "smells like badaam", which is Urdu for almonds, reflecting on different manifestations of love and connection in South Asian households (49). The description of the house settings shows cultural tokens that connect them to their homeland and ethnicity. She also shows the struggle of exploring and connecting with her identity when aunty says that "(her) people might / be Afghani." Asghar feels like "the whole map (is her) mirror" as she draws a ship and writes "Afghani under its hull" then counts "all the oceans, blood & not blood, / all the people (she) could be (49). Her tone quickly shifts when she "crossed the ship / out on the map" and buries it "under a casket of scribbles" because "all the people (she) could be are dangerous" (50-51). The Western discourse and image of brown people in the media following the declaration of "war on terror" followed patterns of European colonial invasions which alienated the colonized people (Carbin et al. 2009). This impacted the way immigrants perceived their own identity which Asghar

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associates with the fear of being judged for being Afghani so she does not answer when the kids at school ask her where she is from (Asghar 2018, 54).

She exposes irony of patriotic discourse that promotes the image of America as a land of greatness in her poem "The Land Where My Father Died." The poem provides an occidental portrayal of America as materialistic, morally flawed, and spiritually lacking (Buruma & Margalit 2004). The poem mimics the American national anthem while the verses reveal neocolonial patterns in America from the perspective of the non-white and marginalized populations as,

> land of buildings & no good manners land of sunless people & offspring of colonizers land of no spice & small pox land of fake flowers land of shackle & branches made of rope land of wire fences grabbing sky (Asghar 2018, 55).

Her critique shows the adversity brought by colonizers including diseases like small pox that never existed in the Americas prior to 1633 when large settlements from Europe arrived there (Berman 2016). The depiction of America by Asghar is not a picturesque romanticization of the West but the reality behind Western progress has ruined the natural state of the world replacing it with brutality extended towards humans living in it.

Furthermore, Asghar draws attention to the brute force and violence used by European colonizers to invade Native American land and kill natives. She shows current manifestations of neocolonialism in America where white Europeans claim ownership of American and use systematic racism to target native Americans. She exposes the cruelty of Western powers and their lack of accountability towards the pain of non-white populations as the former laugh when "(her) people die" and "mispronounce her grief" as they place targets on her "future children's faces" as they continue stealing their land and resources (55). Colonial sense of ownership over the "other" marginalized groups translated into patriarchal binaries as men in post-colonial countries replaced the colonizers and used their strategies of oppression to take over the central position of power. They maintained the power imbalance through the suppression and exploitation of women and gender minorities. In her poem "the art of growing" Rupi Kaur recounts the struggle of being sexualized as twelve-year-old when she reached puberty. The boys at school "wanted to touch all the new / and unfamiliar part of me" instead of playing with her at recess. She felt shame and was compelled to hide her body in an attempt "to bury in (her) rib cage" (Kaur 2017, 94). Men would harass her by calling out "*boobs*." The word "boobs" is slang used mostly by men to label breasts of women. Etymologically, the word originated from the word "puppa" used in Germanic and Latin languages to refer to "little girl" which emerged from Puritanical Western culture associating shame and shyness with sexuality (McKelle 2015). Later on, when Kaur tells her mother than she was sexually abused, her mother tells her that "the men outside are starving" so she "must not dress with (her) breasts hanging" (2017, 94). The onus is placed on women to dress appropriately and "sit with (their) legs closed" otherwise "the boys will get hungry if they see fruit" (94). Her mother tells her to "just learn to act like a lady" and behave "like a women oughta" otherwise she will have to deal with consequences where "men will get angry and fight" (95). But Kaur resists this indoctrination and reiterates the incredulity behind convincing "half the world's population" that her body "is not their bed" (95).

The patriarchal privilege and power over discourse indoctrinates a sense of entitlement in men who use language as a tool to exert their will and fulfil their sexual desires. Kaur says that she hated the way men sexualized her because it made her feel like

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her body "belonged to them" (94). Kaur draws parallels in her untitled poem where she describes how colonizers split the world into pieces by drawing boundaries and claiming ownership over countries that "never belonged" to them (137). In both poems, the marginalized and oppressed "other" loses their autonomy to the powerful "them."

But Kaur challenges the ways in which men use body shaming, harassment and rape to subjugate women. She refuses "to subject (herself) to their ideology / cause slut shaming is rape culture / virgin praising is rape culture" (95). In this way she repudiates rape culture where sexual violence is accepted, downplayed, or trivialized through behaviors, practices, and beliefs that blame victims, dismiss the seriousness of sexual assault, and promote harmful masculinity (Buchwald et al. 1993). In the context of violence, Mohanty calls men "subjects-who-perpetrate-violence" when women are considered as "objects-who-defend-themselves" (24). But Kaur holds men accountable and addresses them as she says "your actions are not my responsibility / you will control yourself" (95-96). Kaur refers to the burden of responsibility that falls on women whereas men are not required control their actions or consider the consequences of their actions.

Exploring Racial Bias

The colonial powers in South Asia established a Eurocentric racial hierarchy based on patriarchal values. Colonizers justified imperial agendas by claiming that non-white races were naturally inferior from an evolutionary perspective and idealized white women for their domesticity, modesty, and moral superiority (Rangan & Chow 2013). In this way, colonizers exploited women through their sexuality, unpaid domestic labor, social and marital rights, and social and religious status (Spencer-Wood 2016). Western beauty standards have further contributed to racial bias where lighter skin is favored over darker skin tones based on what Guattari and Deleuze call "degrees of deviance from whiteness" (S. Sharma & A. Sharma 2003). The resultant discrimination against women of color led to internalized racism within the affected communities (2003, 479). Furthermore, the implementation of 1948 Act's provisions in India and Pakistan infused anxieties about race which contributed to racial hierarchies and the subsequent marginalization of certain communities within the South Asian diaspora (Basu 2020; Ansari 2013). So, when South Asians migrated to the Global North, immigrant women faced discrimination not only from the dominant white population but also from within their own communities. Furthermore, globalization has normalized these hierarchies through neocolonial and capitalist tactics including the use of racism and the appropriation of labor from colonized nations (Loomba 2007). In this context, brown immigrant women are often subject to harmful stereotypes, such as being seen as exotic, submissive, and oppressed, which can perpetuate racism and discrimination.

In an untitled poem, Kaur questions these racialized beauty standards through critical self-reflection that Mohanty considers imperative to decolonize cognition. She questions why she is unkind to her body and reveals Kaur's inner conflict that originates from her the way her body is different from "them" (67) Similarly, in another untitled poem, she acknowledges that she has "reduced her body to aesthetics" by declaring it a "grand failure for not looking like theirs" (78). In both poems, the reinforcement of binaries of "us" and them" centralizes Western aesthetics while dismissing Eastern features as the "other" (Said 1978). The critical reflection on her own racial bias shows goes beyond the way white people perceive brown women but it also affects how they view themselves.

Consequently, the compulsion to conform to white beauty standards has led to the development of a lucrative beauty industry. Eurocentric marketing and advertising

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convince women of color to change their appearances to be considered beautiful and ultimately socially accepted. Kaur exposes the capitalistic agenda behind racism in the beauty industry that highlights insecurities of women. She uses a single stanza in her untitled poem to reveal "it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse / if we believed we were beautiful enough already" (224).

In "basement aesthetician" she mentions run basement salons run by South Asian women for other women who are unable to afford expensive beauty treatments. These salon owners are committed to "aesthetic labor" for "aesthetic consumers" especially with the rise of the culture of waxing for "hygiene/cleanliness and sexual attractiveness" (Dutta 2021). Kaur narrates her experience at one such place where women, who were her mother's age, looked nothing like her "simple mother". All the women with brown skin would dye their hair lighter which Kaur describes as, "yellow hair meant for white skin / streaks like zebras / slits for eyebrows" (81). She dreams for her "caterpillar" eyebrows to look thin like the women in the salon who tried to look like white women. She feels ashamed of her natural body hair that covers her like "velvet" because it makes her feel unfeminine, unclean and undesirable (80). White women, especially the "affluent elite", project the notion of femininity that requires constant discipline and surveillance where "young, white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied and conventionally attractive" (Dutta, 2021). Towards the end of the poem, Kaur questions the justification of aesthetic procedures especially since most of them are painful when she asks herself, "why do i do this / why do i punish my body / for being exactly as its meant to be" (p. 81).

Anti-Capitalist Critique

The West has used exploitative capitalist ventures during colonization of the third world to maintain its central position of power in the global economy. Economic exploitation of South Asian countries inculcated a sense of inferiority in the natives. This ambivalent relationship is seen in their reliance on former colonial powers in cultural, economic, and political ways, even after gaining independence. White colonizers perpetuated the image that only Western powers held the required competence and authority to handle the resources and wealth of colonized countries. Racial bias is still propagated through classism where many immigrants are deprived of significant opportunities in the West to financially improve themselves.

In her poem, "advice i would've given to my mother on her wedding day", Kaur mentions the sacrifices first generation immigrant women of color make to survive. She builds her poem on the premise of hypothetical pieces of advice she would have given her mother on her wedding day. In the second half of the poem, Kaur highlights the way immigrant families resort to frugality due to their monetary struggles after moving to a foreign country with the hope of improving their economic prospects. Kaur tries to instill agency in her mother by letting her know that she is "allowed to spend / a couple of dollars on a coffee" (134). Many women in South Asian households are pressured to meet expectations tied to traditional gender roles. In turn they suppress their own desires and needs for the greater good of the household. Kaur further acknowledges the guilt and shame associated with lack of financial freedom where "other mothers with their / flashy phones and designer clothing" contrast with her mother's inability to speak fluent English or operate a cell phone or computer. Instead of blaming her mother she acknowledges the restrictions of South Asian patriarchal houses. She says,

> we confined you to the four walls of this home
> and worked you to the bone
> you have not been your own property for decades (134).

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The verses indicate the continued commodification of women as "property" owned by others. She also exposes the unpaid and unacknowledged labor of housewives adhering to the patriarchal gender norms enforced in immigrant households.

Similarly, Fatimah Asghar brings attention to the profit men gain from certain South Asian wedding traditions such as brideprices and dowry in her poem "Shadi" that translates to "wedding/marriage" in Urdu and Hindi. She showcases the treatment of women as material commodities. She provides context to the poem in a short caption elucidating the violent impact of Partition of the Sub-continent on women when "75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted and raped" (37). During the partition, trauma and violence were used to target women who were considered the bearers of honor to assert dominant through humiliation and revenge (Manchó 2000; Menon & Bhasin 1998). Asghar mentions that women were either forced to marry or stayed with their abductors voluntarily because they could not return back to their communities. In Pakistan and India, a woman who are victims of rape, abduction, violence or even divorce are outcast as a social pariah. Consequently, their families cannot financially benefit from them through matrimony. Men determine the brideprice which is the amount paid by the husband in return for a woman's reproductive abilities, domestic labor and in ancient times it was also considered payment for her virginity (Anderson 2007). The social status and class determine the payment so socioeconomically deprived rural people measure the worth of women as "two goats / & / maybe a nose ring or a bracelet" (37). Asghar calls for the need to relearn and reassess these demeaning traditions by eliminating "the threats of our uncles / selling us off" to married men with round bellies (37).

At the end of the poem, Asghar advocates for these women who have experienced historical violence and exploitation during and after the partition. She expresses her solidarity in hopes of building a community where women reclaim their identity. She wants them to be known by their real names instead of being called "*butameez*" (which translates to "rude") or "*whore*" when they stand up for themselves or express their desires (37). She highlights how women in South Asian households are deprioritized and underprivileged as they are the first ones to wake up but the last ones to be fed. Moreover, their consent is not taken into consideration to the extent that they experience marital rape and sexual assault even within the protected confines of their own homes. So, Asghar wishes to end this violence and neglect that women endure so that women do not have to relive such history (37).

Furthermore, legacy of colonial plunder and exploitation continues to negatively impact the economic condition of South Asian countries. Many people sought opportunities to improve the financial condition back home by immigrating and working abroad. Asghar shares experiences of her family's financial struggles in America in her poem "Old Country". She describes how her family would save up money to go to the Old Country Buffet then spend the whole day eating and filling the "smuggled" Tupperware with food (31). She considered it the only place where women were allowed to eat as much as they wanted without the accusation "of being wasteful" by their husbands. Brown immigrant families are not afforded the privilege of wasting food at home which contrasts with the "American / way of waste" at the Old Country Buffet where abundance of food and resources are wasted. Asghar draws attention to the resources first world countries like America that has to provide for people but instead maintain a capitalist system of consumerism to continue gaining profit. At these buffets, her family seizes the opportunity to indulge in American "mythical foods" (31-32). She foregrounds the privilege of American children who complain about their own food that

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her family has otherwise only seen on TV. Furthermore, Americans scoff at the biryani brown children bring for lunch showing their bias against anything "foreign" exhibits the nativist and anti-immigrant sentiments of Americans (Asghar 2018, 31; Mohanty 2003, 9).

Conclusion

With the help of Mohanty's theoretical perspective, the researcher is able to understand the aim of an intersectional approach towards postcolonial feminism. It lends a liberty of expression and freedom to share their experiences without the need to censor, modify or specify particular themes. Patriarchal systems are connected to current postcolonial influences through similar hierarchies and values in the analysis. For instance, bullying, objectification, violence, harassment and trauma that the poets vocalize through personal and shared experiences of racial bias overlap with gender bias. Kaur and Asghar criticize the systematic bias and oppression women experience in the form of racism, sexism, classism and misogyny in their poems.

The analysis of their poetry from this particular perspective shows that several forms discriminations and prejudices against women of color are interrelated. If the issue of race is isolated from gender, then many of the struggles and fears experienced by women of color are ignored. The significance of combining racial and feminist issues is to present manifestations of colonial and patriarchal bias that continue to negatively affect the lives of women. For instance, description of a racist incident experienced by the poet is also related to misogyny where she is not just discriminated for being brown, but for being a brown woman.

Overall, this analysis reveals the multiple layers of bias directed towards women of color. The redeeming aspect that has helped South Asian women in diaspora is their feminist practices in their daily lives along with the literary manifestations of decolonial feminist approaches. Through their poetry, Asghar and Kaur challenge the hurdles of oppression that South Asian immigrant women face from people in power, especially men. Feminist practices mentioned in selected poems range from thematic incorporation of resistance in their poetry to verbal and physical reactions to incidents of misogyny, racism or classism that they experienced in their real lives. These themes provide a great contrast to the Third World Women presented in Western theory and literature written by white women. The poetry of Kaur and Asghar provide a counter-discourse of resistance to patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and Western feminism. Through these themes, the poets are able to expose the impact of colonialism and patriarchy in its contemporary form which continues to promote the same values but in different form.

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Biographical Note

Roshan Amber Ali is a lecturer in the Department of English at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. Saima Umer is a PhD scholar at Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi and a lecturer in the Department of English at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

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