

Women and Postcoloniality Stripped to the Bone in Meatless Days

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original site:

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/suleri/cook1.html>

I've lived many years as an otherness machine, had more than my fair share of being other" **Meatless Days**, 105

Sara Suleri's **Meatless Days** rejects any ideological ease in cataloguing otherness. Forcing both postcolonial and feminist theory to circumnavigate the bounded yet contested terrain of identity and discursive formations, she embarks on her poetic voyage with the confident declaration that "leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women" (1). Suleri then proceeds to map her discourse by telling her reader, "my reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant" (1). Following this assertion, the reader can envisage how Suleri's deliberate prose aims to reconstruct this absent community of women.

Suleri's listed roles that fill the displaced category of women -- sister, child, wife, mother, servant -- name without apology only the predicated female to the male subject. Of course, a woman's business depends a great deal on her socio-economic standing. The servant, for example, will locate her negotiated gender position in significant variance with Suleri. In an effort to explain her denial that women in Pakistan live in the "concept of woman" to an otherwise lost audience, Suleri introduces her grandmother Dadi who exists outside of any possible Western feminist terminology.

Closing the text's first chapter with a studied irony similar to its inception, Suleri arrives in a classroom at Yale University where she currently teaches English. Shuttling the reader from Pakistan to New Haven, Suleri shares a classroom anecdote that captures and guides her literary project:

When I teach topics in third world literature, much time is lost in trying to explain that the third world is locatable only as a discourse of convenience. . . And then it happens. A face, puzzled and attentive and belonging to my gender, raises its intelligence to question why, since I am teaching third world writing , I haven't given equal space to

women writers on my syllabus. I look up, the horse's mouth, a foolish thing to be. Unequal images battle in my mind for precedence--there's imperial Ifat, there's Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. And against all my own odds I know what I must say. Because, I'll answer slowly, **there are no women in the third world** . (20)

What does this bold assertion signify, given that Suleri herself constitutes a so-called woman from Pakistan, a country conveniently located in the so-called third world? And why would a student assume that the subject of third world literature necessarily precludes a sensitivity to gender? In her disconcerting response, Suleri refuses the false comfort of binary extremes that haunt continual attempts to define race, gender, and nation.

Suleri simultaneously problematizes Western notions of women within the Pakistani context, as she complicates the popular trope in both postcolonial and feminist theory that posits a racial or national authenticity as prerequisite to any informed analysis. "The claim to authenticity" Suleri explains, "--only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture--points to the great difficulty posited by the authenticity of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want" (137, "Feminism Skin Deep"). A progressive feminist politics relies on a rejection of the seductive yet restrictive boundaries of any either-or paradigm that defines or constrains the experience or identity of women. The assumption that a monolithic category of women exists as a result of sexual difference or shared subordination denies the multiple yet specific overlapping entities--political, cultural, historical, economical--that position women in particular locales at a given time. For that matter, overly determined either-or politics reify the very sexual confines or gendered binaries that feminism seeks to challenge. Therefore, by emptying the dubious categories of women and third world of their superficial authority, Suleri then moves on to a detailed narrative hosting audacious and marvelous women.

Bibliography

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