



Postcolonial Feminist Theory and the Decolonization of Research: A Synergistic Framework for Transnational Feminist Collaborations

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a synergistic framework for transnational feminist collaborations which draws upon the affordances of postcolonial feminist theory and decolonizing research methods. This framework was originally developed for a narrative inquiry study of one Afghan woman's (Parvana's) storied experiences and multiliteracy practices. This collaborative study explored a counter-story to homogenized and static western portrayals of Afghan women as silenced and in need of saving. Drawing upon key tenets from postcolonial feminism and decoloniality, the study focused heavily on collaborative research processes and Parvana's epistemic authority through co-constructed interviews, free-flowing conversations, and participant-generated narrative data, including Parvana's written stories, chats about books that held special meaning for Parvana, and discussions about Parvana's photographs and artifacts. In the writing of the study, Parvana's life story was re-presented through a poetic re-storying which honors her storied and daily lived experiences in her own words. Carefully selected and rearranged excerpts from narrative data highlight in poetic form how Parvana utilizes a wide range of complex and creative multiliteracy strategies for navigating daily life in Afghanistan, including the following, among others: original story writing; the creation of a new literacy promotion program for Afghan citizens; and detailed plans for designing an original, culturally relevant, and fashionable clothing brand for Afghan women. This paper describes how the key tenets from postcolonial feminist theory and decolonizing research practices can offer feminist researchers a synergistic framework for engaging in deeply meaningful collaborative research processes, for embracing the formation of feminist alliances across difference, for critiquing colonizing assumptions behind western centric research practices, for working towards culturally and geographically appropriate approaches to knowledge production, and for more authentically understanding and supporting women transnationally.

Keywords: postcolonial feminist theory, decolonizing research methods, transnational alliances, collaborative knowledge production

1. Purpose/Objectives

Following the tragic events of 9/11, images of Afghan women as silenced victims in need of saving were frequently paired in western news media with a pro-war discourse which argued for rescuing "the brown women from the brown men" (Cloud, 2004, p. 289). Several



researchers have documented how western news coverage consistently drew upon colonialist rhetoric in their portrayal of Afghan women as silent and in need of saving. These static and homogenized images offered limited nuance in terms of authenticity, agency, ethnicity, language, or other individual characteristics (see, e.g., Cloud, 2004; Terman, 2017). Colonialist rhetoric vis-à-vis Afghan women effectively resulted in Afghan women being “doubly colonized: first through the patriarchal categorization of woman as victim (meaning: oppressed by Afghan men, Islam, Afghan society, Afghan family, and so on), and second, through the Othering of Afghan women through colonialism (meaning: oppressed by virtue of the fact that Afghan women are from Afghanistan)” (Raymond, 2021). Beyond that, these reports also suffer from a dearth of evidence from authentic conversations or interviews with actual Afghan women (see, e.g., Chowdury, 2016; Cloud, 2004; Fowler, 2007; MacDonald, 2016; Rasul & McDowell, 2015; Terman, 2017; Zeiger, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to present a synergistic research framework which draws upon the affordances of postcolonial feminist theory and decolonizing research methods and offers researchers a conceptual framework for countering harmful cultural stereotypes while honoring and amplifying a wide range of diverse life experiences. This framework was developed for a narrative inquiry study of one Afghan woman's (Parvana's) storied experiences and multiliteracy practices; this research project explored a counter-story to western homogenized and static portrayals of Afghan women as silenced and in need of saving. Drawing upon key tenets of postcolonial feminism and decoloniality, the study focused heavily on collaborative processes and Parvana's epistemic authority through collaborative conversations and participant-generated narrative data, including Parvana's written stories, discussions about books Parvana had selected, and chats about Parvana's personal photographs and artifacts. During the writing of the study, Parvana's life story was re-presented through a poetic re-storying which drew upon carefully selected and rearranged excerpts from narrative data in poetic form. The poetic re-storying honors Parvana's storied and daily lived experiences in her own words and highlights how Parvana utilizes a wide range of complex and creative multiliteracy strategies for navigating daily life in Afghanistan, including original story writing, the creation of a new literacy promotion program for Afghan citizens, and detailed plans for designing an original, culturally relevant, and fashionable clothing brand for Afghan women, to name a few. This paper describes how key tenets from postcolonial feminist theory can work in tandem with decolonizing research practices as a synergistic framework for engaging in deeply meaningful collaborative research processes, for embracing the formation of feminist alliances across difference, for critiquing colonizing assumptions behind western centric research practices, for working towards culturally and geographically appropriate approaches to knowledge production, and for more authentically understanding and supporting women transnationally.

En/Countering Static Images

Since 2004, I have worked on a variety of international education projects with Afghan faculty, researchers, students, and citizens. Over the years, I have met and worked closely with many Afghan women who have embodied lives which are very different from the static image of Afghan women so often presented in western news media; many of the Afghan women I have worked with have pursued an education, worked and earned money to support their families, convinced their conservative fathers to allow them to attend online classes, and/or dedicated their professional and personal lives to fighting for social justice in Afghanistan. They have become teachers, judges, professors, and writers. They have faced



challenging situations, discrimination, and misogyny, but they have also carved spaces for themselves to express creativity and explore fulfilling opportunities. Over time, it became clear that the static western portrayals of Afghan women did not match what I was experiencing in my work with actual Afghan women. As I developed deeper friendships with Afghan women engaging in a wide range of creative strategies for navigating daily life, I was left wondering how to challenge or counter the dangerous “single story” I was seeing in the news (Adichie, 2009).

Several researchers have noted how counterimages can be utilized effectively as a tool for challenging and upending static stereotypes and for increasing feelings of empathy and understanding (see, e.g., Vedantam, 2013; Lai et al., 2014). Segal (2011) has noted that social empathy, or “the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations” (p. 266) can increase cross-cultural sensitivity and “insight into structural inequalities and disparities” (p. 267). In response to my increasing dismay over contradictions between static portrayals of Afghan women as completely lacking in agency and the reality of diversity and creativity I was witnessing, I reached out to my Afghan friend Parvana and asked if she might be interested in sharing her life story in a collaborative study. She had also frequently commented on her frustration not only with the challenges of daily life in Afghanistan but also with persistent stereotypes in the west about Afghanistan and Afghan women, and she readily agreed. Parvana expressed her frustration and her desire to be a change agent during one of our many conversations: “I want to show Afghanistan to these people. It drives you to bring this social justice in society because at the end of the day, being as a citizen of Afghanistan, I feel I am responsible to bring this. I mean, all of us are responsible for it. I mean if we don’t, then who?” (Conversation with Parvana, as cited in Raymond, 2021, p. 192).

In this paper, I will briefly summarize the methodology and findings of my study with Parvana and will then focus more deeply on the theoretical and conceptual framework which guided us on our research journey. It is my hope that this framework might serve to inspire others to join us in our work towards challenging persistent assumptions and cross-cultural stereotypes, increasing social empathy for others, and amplifying the wide range of diverse life experiences across the world.

2. Methodology

Narrative inquiry, collaborative data collection, and relationship cultivation

This narrative inquiry project explored the authentic lived experiences of Parvana, an Afghan woman who until very recently lived in Afghanistan. I met Parvana in 2010 when we started working together on an online English language program for Afghan girls and women in Kandahar. After many years of working together closely and exchanging daily emails about programming, students, and logistics, we each pursued projects which took us in different directions. Parvana went to university in Afghanistan, and I left my position with the online program. Our friendship, however, had taken hold, and we continued to meet online on a regular basis. By 2019, we decided to work together on a larger research project to explore Parvana’s life story. Data collection in the project took place entirely online (e.g., via WhatsApp, Skype, email) from January 2019 until February 2021 and included a variety of strategies for Parvana to generate self-selected narrative data through open-ended interviews, written stories, book discussions, conversations, photographs, and artifacts. Data analysis sought to dig beneath the surface meaning of Parvana’s stories and included strategies to



tease out hidden themes and patterns. Some of these strategies included three-dimensional narrative analysis, thematic analysis, design analysis, artifactual analysis, and poetic re-storying. During data collection, analysis, and final report writing, Parvana reviewed and contributed to each phase of the project, including selecting how she wanted to share her story and offering input on transcripts, analyses, and poetic re-storying. Because data collection in this study was highly collaborative and centered on participant self-selected data, our relationship and interaction occupied a central role in the study. Because this focus on relationship cultivation and the deep exploration of individual life and experience is also a key feature of narrative inquiry, a narrative approach was a logical choice for our work together.

3. Exploring findings through arts-based methods: Poetic re-storying

Our research together revealed that Parvana's storied experiences illustrate how she utilizes a wide range of complex and creative multiliteracy strategies for navigating daily life in Afghanistan, including original story writing, the creation of a new literacy promotion program for Afghan citizens, detailed plans for an original and culturally relevant and fashionable clothing brand for Afghan women, and many others. To remain true to the postcolonial feminist framework guiding this study, Parvana's story was re-presented through her own words in poetic re-storying. By selecting key passages from the narrative data and creating a standalone chapter of poetry, we focused on Parvana's authentic lived experiences over time. The poetic format served as a creative platform for honoring Parvana's lived experiences in a more authentic way while also provoking "emotional engagement and human connection between the author, the person being represented, and the audience" (Leavy, 2015, p. 92).

4. Postcolonial feminist theory and the decolonization of research methods

WEIRD populations, positional superiority, and the power in words

Consider this for a moment: Up to eighty percent of academic research in the social and behavioral sciences comes from data with WEIRD populations (western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic), even though those populations only make up only about twelve percent of the world's total population. Although WEIRD populations make up the minority of the world's population, results from studies with them are often used to form generalizations about the majority of the world's populations even though the majority of the world experiences life in vastly different ways (Azar, 2010, p. 11). This tendency to generalize research findings from studies based on experiences of the world's minority populations to the experiences of the world's majority populations privileges the few over the many, leaving out vastly different ways of experiencing the world in the process. This egregious omission is neither an innocent nor a new phenomenon. The act of generalizing research results based on twelve percent of the world's population to the rest of the world is laden with disturbing implications related to superiority, exclusion, and discrimination.

Said (1978) uncovers and analyzes the development of a similar strategic and rhetorical posturing of "positional superiority" (p. 7), whereby images of "Orientalist" cultures are strategically manipulated to be seen as *primitive*, *uneducated*, or *violent* when contrasted with



their more *civilized* and *educated* western counterparts (p. 9). Furthermore, these contrastive constructs are then paired with their hierarchically charged linguistic counterparts of *first/third* and *developing/developed* cultures. Over time, these rhetorically manipulated images have been reinforced and taken root.

To disrupt the linguistic hegemony embedded in the linguistically charged constructs of *first/developed* and *third/developing* world, I will substitute the term “majority world” (Norsworthy, 2017, p. 1036) for terms like *Third World* or *developing world* in this paper. The term “majority world” is a more accurate, fitting, and non-discriminatory way of representing the *actual* majority of the world’s population, especially considering the fact that generalizations are often made about majority world populations based on the experiences of the few. Similarly, I will refer to the *west* or the *western* world with lower case letters to disrupt the semiotic and geopolitical implications of capitalizing the terms *West* or *Western* world.

Postcolonial feminist theory

Postcolonial feminist theorists have identified and challenged the ways in which the west has portrayed “the colonial subject as Other” (Spivak, 2010, 0. 35) and represented “majority world women and female voices as marginalized, silent, and inferior” (Raymond, 2021, p. 25). This rhetoric often occurs in tandem with an “incapacity of westerners to listen or hear the other, beyond enforcing and projecting their own Eurocentric sensibilities upon them—rendering the subaltern unseen and unheard” (Darder, 2018, p. 94). Postcolonial feminists push back against the “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 2010, p. 35) that occurs when nondominant epistemologies are not only “rendered silent and invisible, but are often absorbed or destroyed” (Darder, 2018, p. 97). By shifting the focus from an *Othering* to an *Honoring*, postcolonial feminists seek to highlight the “perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing that have historically otherwise often been marginalized, erased, or subsumed under a master narrative which privileges western-centric research approaches and perspectives” (Raymond, 2021, p. 16).

My research with Parvana draws heavily upon some of the key tenets from postcolonial feminist theory, including Mohanty’s (2003) notion of “feminism without borders” (p. 1)—a feminist vision which embraces the forging of feminist alliance across difference, and which is critical of colonizing discourse which marginalizes non-dominant epistemologies. This feminist vision recognizes and honors a diversity of lived experience forged by race, class, socioeconomics, culture, and other individual characteristics. Finally, postcolonial feminist theory offers a framework for resisting western dominant knowledge production through decolonizing research acts and innovative approaches to knowledge production (see e.g., Falcón, 2016; Mohanty, 2003; Mutua & Swadener, 2004).

Some argue that these decolonizing acts are often “anchored in the daily lives of women” (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xxxviii). By shedding light on the complex daily experiences and struggles of women, it becomes possible to demonstrate that every day moments are an “integral aspect of the epistemology of anticolonial feminist struggle” (p. xxxviii). In other words, it is the everyday experiences of living life as a woman in a particular society at a particular point in time that can shed light on the particularity of each woman’s lived experience and how she navigates her world. To offer a concrete example from the research project described at the beginning of this article: Parvana’s stories of her everyday life, including her challenges, successes, and strategies for resisting and persisting,



are examples of her richly diverse multiliteracy practices and how she navigates daily life as a woman in Afghanistan.

Having settled on postcolonial feminism as a framework for my research with Parvana, I developed a definition of *postcolonial feminism* which included the following five key statements to shape and guide our work together:

It understands the *post* in postcolonial to mean a “going beyond” or a “politically more active mode of engagement” (Shohat, 1992, p. 108).

It is a feminist vision which is critical of colonizing discourses and research practices which intentionally or unintentionally marginalize non-dominant epistemologies.

It recognizes and embraces diversity in sexuality, race, class, culture, and other diverse areas of the human experience.

It encourages the forging of feminist alliances across difference, and, finally,

It aims to decolonize pedagogy and research through the development of opportunities for exploring and analyzing power, privilege, and gender oppression while also developing strategies for resistance and transformation (Raymond, 2021, p. 22).

The project of decolonization

With these guiding statements in mind, I considered ways to push against some of the colonizing tendencies in research and to decolonize the research process. I looked for alternatives which might allow us “to see the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between communities of women such that power, privilege, agency, and dissent can be made visible and engaged with” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 244). In my project with Parvana, one of these strategies included shifting the focus from a researcher-participant relationship to more highly collaborative procedures where Parvana decided how best to share her story and what aspects of her life story to share. This shift in focus vis-à-vis data collection procedures led to more insightful takeaways than I would have gained if I had assumed to know how best to understand Parvana’s life story, or if I had occupied the driver’s seat for the entire research project.

Some of the ways in which Parvana’s choices informed, enriched, and guided our research procedures include the following: Parvana volunteered to share two stories she had written about a frightening bus trip with her family and an attack on her university, and we then talked about her experiences, feelings, writing process, motivation, imagery, and literary choices; She asked me to participate in a series of peer mentoring meetings, and we talked about challenges and victories from our daily lives as we practiced mindful listening and cultural humility; She told me the books *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Rumi’s Daughter* had helped her navigate through difficult times and had inspired her to persist, so I also read the books, and we engaged in heartfelt discussions about the characters, their lives, the books’ overarching themes, and connections to our own daily lives. I came to know Parvana more deeply during that time than I had expected because she guided me to the stories, books, and experiences which had shaped her life.

When Parvana had shared her story in a wide variety of ways, I considered how to represent her life in ways that were consistent with the guiding tenets of postcolonial feminist theory and decolonizing research methods. I wanted to recognize, honor, and amplify Parvana’s epistemic authority and her diverse literacy practices. I wanted Parvana to tell her



own story with her own words, so I moved to poetic re-storying. Faulkner (2018) argues that actively engaging with poetry is consistent with feminist research projects because it highlights “a means of doing, showing, and teaching embodiment and reflexivity, a way to refuse the mind-body dialectic, a form of feminist ethnography, and a catalyst for social agitation and change” (p. 1).

With this in mind, I carefully selected and rearranged examples from the narrative data to highlight how Parvana utilizes a wide range of complex and creative multiliteracy strategies for navigating daily life in Afghanistan, including excerpts from the following: Parvana's story writing which helped her process and document harrowing experiences in her life; conversations about her commitment to create and run a new literacy program for Afghan citizens; and descriptions of photos and detailed plans for designing original, culturally relevant, and fashionable clothing for Afghan women, to name just a few. The narrative excerpts were then rearranged and pieced together as a poetic re-presentation of Parvana's life.

Parvana carefully reviewed the poetic re-storying, and we then worked together to edit a final version to best reflect and amplify her life experiences. In a later conversation about the decision to turn to poetry to honor her story, Parvana reflected on what this unusual approach represented for her:

I mean, the other great thing about this is its authenticity and how true each and everything about this piece is. I think that makes it even more powerful because there is nothing that is made up or is just said out of nowhere. I think it wouldn't have been explained this well if you had chosen another form other than poetry. I think it [poetry] is the best fit for the story. [...] It takes you to the different times back and forth, like the character, and personally for me. It really shows how much a person has transformed. I mean always. It represents a lot, a lot, a lot about a person. ... It's the story of so many Afghan women—what they go through, but they are usually not represented in such an ordered and great way. [...] I love it. I scrolled over it a lot since you have sent it. I'm scrolling over it and reading it. It's quite powerful. (Conversation with Parvana as cited in Raymond, 2021, 134).

The poetic rendering offered us a creative possibility for presenting Parvana's story in non-traditional ways while also highlighting Parvana's rich and complex storied experiences and multiliteracy practices in an accessible and engaging form. To give readers an opportunity to engage a bit with Parvana's remarkable story, I am including a brief excerpt from the 44-page poetic rendering here. In this passage, Parvana reflects on how her life had changed from that of a ten-year-old girl who felt ill equipped to fight against injustice against women and her life as a twenty-one-year-old woman who has “achieved the strength, the courage, and the ability to fight back against negative stereotypes and behaviors towards girls and women even though there is great danger in doing so” (Conversation with Parvana as cited in Raymond, 2021, p. 88). In the following passage from the poetic re-storying, Parvana reflects on how she has changed over time:



I am a different me

When I was ten...

I wouldn't think about improving other lives,
Or having the idea of improving other women's lives.
I mean I wanted it, but I really could not figure it out.

Most of the time I would forget even thinking about myself,
so how would I think about other women?

Harassment was there. I told you.

Although I was ten—even smaller—

I was being harassed by the men in the streets,
and even men who followed me to home and brought me letters.

Wrote me letters and slipped it inside my house's door.

That time I was so scared,

And I thought I did not have a voice to speak.

I thought it is a shame to talk about it.

To really care for yourself.

To really think about what you really want to be yourself.

To have that freedom of walking in a street.

I could not talk to anyone about it.

Society influences you in a way that you forget who you really are.

You don't get that feeling from nowhere.

People do not tell you, you should have a purpose in life.



They will try to take that purpose from you even if you have it,

but they would never encourage you to have it.

Today...

I can say I am a different me—a totally different person.

Today who I am is I think how to improve.

I think what changes to bring, which ways to choose, which differences to bring.

Today when I see something, I fight back.

I do not remain calm even if it gets to physical fight.

I have done that with men a lot in the bazaars

although there's a huge threat to doing that because these men can do anything to you.

But I do not back off.

I mean, what's the purpose in your life, your goal as a woman, as a human being?

I think I have a voice today,

And I think I can speak for others also.

I can totally see myself being very very very strong now.

So this is the different self that I think that I changed a lot.

A different *strong* me.

(Poetic re-presentations of Parvana's storied experiences, as cited in Raymond, 2021, pp. 178-180)

Working so closely together on this project allowed us to reflect on and disrupt traditional power dynamics in research collaborations. The highly collaborative nature of this project allowed us to challenge traditional approaches to research as Parvana co-constructed the project through self-selected data, like written stories and artifact descriptions, and we



focused on more collaborative processes, like book discussions and peer mentoring sessions. Future acts of decoloniality might include publishing this and other similar research in open access journals, so other feminist researchers can easily download and read about our work together. Other researchers have noted similar strategies for decolonizing research practices, including “radical reflexivity” (Norsworthy, 2017, p. 1040) and other practices which intensify the collaborative aspects of research while building trust, engaging in dialogue, practicing cultural humility, and cultivating relationships (see, e.g., Falcón, 2016; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Norsworthy, 2017; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper describes how drawing upon affordances offered by postcolonial feminist theory can work in tandem with decolonizing research practices as a synergistic framework for engaging in deeply meaningful collaborative research processes, for embracing the formation of feminist alliances across difference, for critiquing colonizing assumptions behind western centric research practices, for working towards culturally and geographically appropriate approaches to knowledge production, and for more authentically understanding and supporting women transnationally. This conceptual framework offers one model for cultivating meaningful transnational feminist collaborations which are informed and fueled by cultural humility, imagination, and a “practice of not knowing” which encourages us to “genuinely engage with others across difference” (Perry, 2018, p. 9). Research that begins with conversation, relationship building, and common ground rather than from the reinforcement of power imbalances has the potential to offer meaningful collaborations built on trust and respect. By utilizing the tools offered by postcolonial feminism and decoloniality—tools which demand that we carefully reflect on and challenge systems of power that we might consciously or subconsciously embody when engaging in research, we can reiteratively remind ourselves during the research process and beyond that we are obligated to engage in research that actively resists dominant power narratives which are laden with linguistic, semiotic, and geopolitical assumptions that often silence, subsume, or ignore majority world epistemologies.

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