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TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AND THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT IN RUM'S *A WOMAN IS NO MAN*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Etaf Rum's debut novel A Woman Is No Man (2019) through the intersecting lenses of transnational feminism and postcolonial theory. Drawing on the frameworks of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study investigates how Rum constructs the Palestinian-American female subject as a site of competing patriarchal, diasporic, and neocolonial pressures. The article argues that the novel refuses both Western liberal feminist universalism and uncritical cultural relativism by articulating a feminist politics rooted in the lived specificity of Arab-American immigrant women. Through close textual analysis of the novel's three narrative voices Isra, Fareeda, and Deya the article demonstrates how Rum mobilizes silence, storytelling, and intergenerational memory as modes of postcolonial feminist resistance. The analysis further explores how domestic space functions simultaneously as a site of patriarchal containment and potential liberation, and how diasporic displacement complicates the relationship between gender, culture, and agency. Ultimately, the article contends that A Woman Is No Man contributes a nuanced and politically engaged voice to the emerging body of Arab-American women's literature, one that demands a decentering of Western feminist epistemologies.

Keywords: *transnational feminism, postcolonial theory, Palestinian diaspora, gender, subaltern*

1. Introduction

Contemporary Arab-American women's fiction occupies a contested and generative space within the broader field of postcolonial and diaspora studies. In the works of writers like Diana Abu-Jaber, Laila Lalami and Susan Muaddi Darraj, the question of cultural belonging and women's self-determination, of the inheritance of patriarchy and the attractions of liberal western individualism, has been a longstanding issue. Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* (2019) is a book of urgent, purposeful intervention, one that does not lend itself easily to resolution but instead is a sustained and uncomfortable exploration of the meaning of being an Arab woman in America, caught between the demands of communal honor and the desire for selfhood.

Published to widespread critical and commercial attention, Rum's novel follows three generations of Palestinian-American women in Brooklyn –

Isra, the young bride who arrives from the West Bank in 1990 to marry into a family; her iron-willed mother-in-law, Fareeda; and Deya, Isra's daughter, who is coming of age in 2008 and starts to question the silences that have shaped her family. The focus of the novel is on what Mohanty (1988) terms the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a single and monolithic subject" (p. 61), one that Rum's text both exposes and breaks down. In its tripartite narrative structure, the novel emphasizes the heterogeneity of Arab women's experiences while still being mindful of the structures that limit them. As the narrator notes in the prologue: "Where I come from, voicelessness is the condition of my gender, as normal as the bosoms on a woman's chest, as necessary as the next generation growing inside her belly" (Rum, 2019, p. 1). This condition is established as an inherited burden where "we've been taught to silence ourselves, that our silence will save us" (p. 1).

This article engages with *A Woman Is No Man* (2019) from a theoretical perspective within the context of transnational feminist and postcolonial theory. The central argument has three aspects. First, Rum's novel overtly challenges the authority of Western liberal feminism, which places the oppression of Palestinian-American women in relation to other systems of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy, immigration law, and racialization, which a universalist feminist politics cannot properly acknowledge. Second, that the novel borrows ideas from the fields of postcolonial studies on hybridity, mimicry, and subalternity to trace the complicated negotiations of identity that its female diasporic protagonists engage in. Thirdly, that the domestic, the kitchen, the bedroom, the arranged marriage, is not just a place of enclosure, but the very ground on which feminist consciousness and resistance, albeit precariously, is created.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transnational Feminism and Its Interventions

It is this that accounts for the appearance of transnational feminism as a critical paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s, which is a critical reaction to the universal claims of second-wave Western feminism. The key essay in this tradition is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's seminal "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988). According to Mohanty, despite its emancipatory objectives, the work of Western feminist scholarship often reinscribes colonialist epistemologies in constructing a "Third World Woman" as a victim of patriarchy, tradition and underdevelopment, a woman who is both opposed to and different from the implicitly emancipated and modern Western Woman. This discursive process, Mohanty (1988) argues, "colonizes and appropriates the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries" (p. 64), and thus prevents understanding their lives in their material, historical and cultural specificity.

Later reconsidering her position, however, Mohanty proposes a more hopeful view of feminist solidarity in "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles" (2003) which is based not on shared victimhood but on shared resistance to global capitalism and the overlapping systems of oppression such as race, gender, and class. This new framework is especially relevant to Rum's novel, which portrays the oppression of Arab-American women as inextricably linked to the precariousness of immigrant life, to the exploitation of undocumented workers, and to the racial marginalization of Arab communities in post-9/11 United States.

The transnational feminist project is further explored and theorized in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's edited volume Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices (1994), which theorizes the unevenness of feminist organizing across national and cultural borders. They call for considering the "the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies, including those of global economic structures, patriarchy, nationalisms and colonialism" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 17). Their emphasis on the decentralization of feminist practice away from the metropolitan centers of the West and towards the situated knowledges of women all over the world offers an important

perspective for reading Rum's novel as a contribution towards the 'knowledge of the margins'.

2.2 Postcolonial Theory and the Female Subject

Postcolonial theory has generated a rich body of scholarship on gender and subjectivity that informs the present analysis. Spivak's canonical essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) poses a fundamental question about the representation of silenced and marginalized women's voices: she argues that the subaltern woman occupies a position of radical marginalization from the apparatuses of representation, unable to be heard or to speak in ways the dominant discourse can recognize. However, the subaltern is not voiceless; Spivak (1988) states that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (p. 308), because the systems of discourse that could represent her voice are organized according to the very hierarchies that create her subalternity.

This framework has proved both generative and contested in feminist postcolonial studies. Some scholars like Sara Suleri (1992) and Benita Parry (1994) have criticized Spivak's overall conclusion for overestimating the silencing of colonial/patriarchal discourses and underestimating the agency of the colonized/ subalternized subject. Parry, especially, wants to bring back the "evidence of native agency" (p. 172) in postcolonial texts that are "blind" to Spivak's project. It is this tension between silence and speech, between subalternity and agency that Rum's novel inhabits and explores.

Another essential framework used for this analysis is the theorization of hybridity and the third space by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha says that both colonial and postcolonial identities are never pure or unchanging, but are always produced in the ambivalent, interstitial space of cultural encounter and negotiation. The idea of mimicry, as Bhabha (1994) calls it, "almost the same but not quite," (p. 126), is especially relevant in the performance and resistance of Rum's characters to the expectations imposed on them by the Arab patriarchy and American cultural norms.

2.3 Arab-American Women's Literature

In the past few decades, Arab-American women's writing has become a much more expansive study, and researchers are now more attentive to the way Arab-American women's writing negotiates the unique challenges of racialization, Islamophobia, and gender in the American sphere. Lisa Suhair Majaj's work has been especially important in outlining the boundaries of Arab-American literature, and the "neither Black nor white" (Majaj, 1996, p. 68) marginality of Arab Americans in American racial formations, which has grown more extreme in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Nadine Naber's Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism (2012) offer an invaluable sociological foundation for the cultural analysis that is conducted here. Naber chronicles how Arab-American communities have reacted to racialization and surveillance, emphasizing the policing of gender and sexual norms within Arab-American communities, which endangers the female body as a storehouse of cultural authenticity and communal honor. It is this that Rum's novel and the transnational feminist analysis it requires is about this dynamic of external racism leading to internal patriarchy.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi (1992) has edited an anthology of modern Palestinian literature, which places Palestinian women's writing in the context of the Palestinian cultural production and national identity, and Joseph Massad (2006) and Rebecca Saunders (2001) have written about the gendered aspects of Palestinian diaspora and how the Palestinian women's body is a battleground in the question of the Palestinian national identity. In more recent years, Steven Salaita's Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics (2007), has provided a systematic account of the political aspects of Arab-American literature and its role as a form of cultural resistance to the American imperial and Orientalist hegemony.

With respect to Rum's novel specifically, critical responses have been directed towards an analysis of the novel's discussion of arranged marriage and domestic violence (El Ajjani & Moumni, 2025), silence as a literary and political tool and the novel's status as an addition to the genre of Arab-

American feminist literature (Salvianny & Nurcahyani, 2020). The present article expands on the incipient field of such research and introduces a more systematic theoretical toolbox to the postcolonial and transnational feminist aspects of the text.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article's theory is built on the intersection of three interrelated fields of thought: transnational feminist theory, postcolonial theory and feminist diaspora studies. These frameworks are not applied in a linear or stand-alone fashion but are understood as inherently interdependent and always in conversation with each other, a move reflecting the complexity of the text being analyzed.

The main theoretical foundation of this analysis is Mohanty's transnational feminist framework which is based on the simultaneous analysis of both the local and the global, the structural and the experiential. Central to Mohanty's (2003) methodology is what she calls the "feminist solidarity model" (p. 521), which argues that instead of assuming a universal sisterhood, feminist analysis should start from an analysis of the specific configurations of power that affect women's lives in different geopolitical and historical contexts, including capitalism, colonialism, racism and patriarchy. For Rum's Palestinian-American women, such an intervention involves the intersecting frames of Israeli occupation (displacing the family to the West Bank), American immigration policies (making some characters undocumented and economically precarious), racial othering (making Arab Americans perpetual foreigners), and Arab patriarchy (silencing and subduing women).

A second major approach on which Spivak's theorization of the subaltern is used approximates the concept, one that is sensitive to the novel's own emphasis on the partial, contested nature of women's silence. However, rather than viewing the novel's female characters as voiceless subalterns, as has been the tendency, the research draws on Pheng Cheah's (2006) revision of the concept of silence: postcolonial texts can be viewed as a form of subaltern speech that operates within and against the discursive systems which produce subalternity. The act of speaking for and as the silenced Arab-American woman, as presented in this reading of Rum's novel, is complicated, but not negated, by the fact that Rum is herself an educated, published, English-speaking woman.

The framework of Bhabha's "third space" is used to examine the state of diasporic in-betweenness of Rum's protagonists. According to Bhabha (1994) it is in the "third space" that cultural meanings and values are "often contested, negated and inscribed" (p. 207), resulting in an identity that is irreducibly hybrid and not simply traditional or simply assimilated. This third space is geographically located (Brooklyn neither Palestine nor America), temporally (between the time of the homeland and the time of the host society), and domestically (as the place where the family home is most vividly represented and challenged).

Finally, the analysis is informed by the concept of the feminist diaspora studies, as proposed by Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996). In keeping with Brah's (1996) notion of the "diaspora space" (p. 209), it is the point at which several diasporas (economic diaspora, cultural diaspora, gender diaspora, etc.) meet at the sites of displacement and resettlement. What is important, however, is that for Brah the diaspora space is not only a space of loss and longing, but a space of contestation and creativity – a space where new forms of identity and community can be constructed. This is a productive aspect of the diaspora, and it is very significant to the novel's concluding movement, where Deya starts to envision a future that does not necessarily mirror the masculinist past, but also does not attempt to take the route of western liberal individualism.

4. Analysis

4.1 Against Universalism: Situating Palestinian-American Women's Oppression

In this regard, one of the most important and politically significant steps taken by *A Woman Is No Man* is the refusal of the universalist feminist gesture, a gesture that would separate the oppression of Arab women from its historical and geopolitical context and make it a part of a

universal narrative of oppression against women and domination over them. Rum is very conscious of the hazards of such extraction, and it employs a variety of techniques to protect from such extraction.

Of these the most significant is the novel's emphasis on the Palestinian background of the family's origins. The characters' exodus from the West Bank is not so biographical as the condition of their subjectivity. Isra's passivity and resignation, perhaps read alone and interpreted as essentially Arab female psychology, are understood as historically produced, as a form of life that has developed in a society under military occupation, a context where submission to power is the condition of life. In fact, as Rum (2019) writes, "Isra had learned from a very young age that obedience was the single path to love" (p. 6), a condition taught through the layers of occupation, poverty, and the traditions of patriarchy.

This contextual insistence situates the novel in direct opposition to Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship, which results in the Third World woman as an a-historical victim of culture and tradition. The novel does not allow the reader to attribute the suffering of its characters to an 'outdated' Arab culture, since it is based on the concrete history of Palestinian displacement. The family's migration to America does not alleviate but rather reconfigures and in some ways magnifies the systems of oppression: economic insecurity, racism, and a need to cling to their own cultural identity in a diasporic context all contribute to new forms of containment.

The character of Fareeda is very important in this respect. The most complicated and in many ways most problematic of the characters in the novel is Fareeda, who is at once the most important enforcer of the patriarchal codes within the family and a woman molded and restricted by those codes. A demand for submission on her daughters-in-law is not just a cruel requirement, but a survival strategy that has worked for her and brought her the security she desires. Fareeda's embrace of patriarchy is mimicry in Bhabha's sense, an imitation of the structures of power which have dominated her life, done in the mistaken belief that accommodation is the safest way to survival. This is reinforced by a warning: "Location will not change her naseeb, her destiny. . . There is nothing out there for a woman but her bayt wa dar, her house and home" (Rum, 2019, p. 10).

4.2 Silence, Storytelling and the Subaltern Voice

Silence in the novel is the most prevalent and most theory-laden trope. The women of the Adam family are silenced at every level: by the social injunction against female speech that governs Arab communal life; by the linguistic barriers of immigration; by the psychological damage inflicted by domestic violence; and by the structural invisibility of immigrant women of color within American public life. Rum's novel is, on one level, an extended meditation on the conditions and costs of this silence.

The politics of negation and erasure are signaled from the novel's opening epigraphs by Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde, which highlight the "agony" of the "untold story" and the failure of silence to provide safety. The title itself, *A Woman Is No Man*, refers to the patriarchal logic enforced by the older generation specifically Fareeda, who tells the rebellious Sarah that "A woman is not a man" (Rum, 2019, p. 94) to remind her that her gender precludes her from the freedoms of her brothers. This phrase enacts the logic of gendered limitations, asserting that a woman's worth is tied strictly to her domestic role as a wife and mother. The whole story is framed in this dialectic: the cultural demand for a woman's erasure versus her internal struggle to claim a voice.

Spivak's model is helpful in this regard, but silence in the novel is a more dialectical phenomenon than suggested by an easy application of Spivak's thesis. The character of Isra, the most completely silenced character of the novel, is acutely aware of her silencing during childbirth: "She wanted to scream out, like Mama had, but for some reason she found herself unable to open her mouth. She didn't want to display her pain, not even in sounds" (Rum, 2019, p. 80). This awareness, this consciousness of speechlessness, is itself an act of agency, a testament to how subjectivity persists below and within structures that aim to destroy it. Even Isra's most abject moments, however, bear

witness to an interior life, a constant flow of longing and resistance, that cannot be reduced to mere victimhood, as Parry (1994) insisted on recovering evidence of native agency.

The most important uses of storytelling serve as a strategy for feminist pedagogy. The plot has women telling bedtime stories that seem to fit traditional gender roles but carry coded messages. When Sarah challenges the value of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Isra defends the narrator: "Her voice was a weapon—a reminder of the extraordinary power of stories, and even more, the strength of a single woman" (Rum, 2019, p. 61). Feminism, then, is not a universal practice, but is a practice that is located locally and historically in response to specific structures of oppression. This is a kind of covert narration that is reminiscent of what Homi Bhabha (1994) has called the ambivalence of colonial mimicry: a narrative that seems to strengthen the power of the patriarchy and yet undermines it from within. On the surface, the stories that Isra tells her daughters are those of female obedience, submission; but underneath is a message about the need and possibility of a different life. The novel's climactic feminist realization takes place when Deya finally realizes that the message hidden inside the code is, in fact, the meaning she longs for.

This version of the covert feminisms model is significant in the context of how the novel addresses Mohanty's (2003) framework of feminist solidarity. The women in the novel are not allowed to participate in the type of organized feminist politics that Mohanty imagines, and are instead limited by their economic dependency, social isolation, and constant threat of violence. But they enact a version of intimacy and informality, a kind of solidarity that, by virtue of being intimate and informal, is necessarily covert, and therefore a viable feminist politics under their conditions of possibility.

4.3 Feminist Contestation in the Domestic Space

The domestic space (kitchen, bedroom, dining table) is the central space and central metaphor in *A Woman Is No Man*. The almost exclusive range of the novel's setting within the interior of the Adam family home could be interpreted as a formal restriction, a naturalistic representation of how geographically and socially restricted the women are. But this reading underestimates the theoretical work that the novel does, that is, in its constant attention to the domestic.

The home is a prison and a kingdom for Rum's women. It is the space where they are most fully under the jurisdiction of patriarchy – monitored, disciplined, contained – and it is the space where they have whatever power and agency they have. Fareeda's sovereignty is purely domestic, she rules her household with a kind of iron efficiency, and as such has a kind of sovereignty albeit limited in the patriarchal order. Within the home lie the sweetest pursuits: cooking, reading, and caring for her daughters are all joyful things to be done in the home. It resists seeing domesticity one-dimensionally, whether as oppression (as some Western liberal feminists would see it) or one dimensionality of seeing it as a celebration (as conservative cultural nationalists would see it).

It is also the home in the novel, which is the main place of Bhabha's third space, the space of cultural negotiation and hybrid identity formation. America is not completely absent from the Adam family home in Brooklyn American TV, American schools, American economic concerns are present throughout, but it is also furnished with Arabic items and steeped in Arabic norms. Deya's cultural hybridity is crucial to the possibility of her feminist consciousness, as she can see enough of American models of female autonomy to know that restrictions on her are not inevitable, and she is embedded in a Palestinian culture that allows her not to assimilate but rather to resist.

Of particular interest is Avtar Brah's (1996) notion of the "homing desire." Fareeda recounts the trauma of her origin: "I was only six years old when my family relocated to the refugee camp… Even as a child, I knew my place" (Rum, 2019, p. 113). The novel's women traffic back and forth between contradictory notions of homing: a Palestinian home that is a construction more than a reality; an American home that is not a home for Palestinians; a home, a place of intimate belonging and safety, that lies outside the orbit of Palestinian patriarchy and American racism. This is Deya's third desire, a refusal to acknowledge at home a

place that refuses her humanity, her final act of resistance being to go to college against the wishes of her family.

4.4 Intergenerational Transmission of Feminist Consciousness

One of the most innovative aspects of the novel is its emphasis on intergenerational feminist transmission. The trajectory from Isra (1990s) to the intermediary figure of Fareeda to Deya (2008) is not a straight line from oppression to liberation, but a complicated dialectic in which each generation inherits, evolves, and partially passes on an incomplete feminism, one that is always in danger and always in tension with the patriarchy it opposes.

Isra is the most tragic character in the novel, the one who is most thoroughly defeated by the forces around her in her pursuit of feminism. Her death is mapped out as it happens, and it is the most devastating thing that the novel dissects. But Isra is not a one-dimensional victim: her act of storytelling to her daughters, of embedding feminist messages in the stories she gives to her daughters, is an intentional and significant act of feminist agency that transcends her life. In this regard, Isra speaks even from beyond silence: a complexification that also deserves the attention of theory of Spivak (1988).

The transmission of patriarchy by a victim of patriarchy, as it is done by Fareeda, is the most complicated intergenerational transmission in the novel. It is a central paradox to the novel's political argument. But Fareeda is not just an ally to patriarchy, she is someone who has to accommodate the patriarchal structures because of the conditions of her life: the precarity of immigrant life, of being displaced, of the real sense that submission is the only viable survival strategy for an Arab woman in America. In the later part of the novel, her softening attitude towards Deya is not a redemption of her complicity but a humanization of it where it is a matter of structure and not individuality in patriarchal reproduction.

Deya's feminist awakening is greatly shaped by her interaction with books, and specifically, with those that tell the stories of women's lives outside the bounds of the Arab-American domestic. It is important to highlight the function of reading and the culture of reading in the novel's feminist politics: it is not Western individualist liberalism that wakes up Deya's feminist consciousness, and, more important, it is not the consciousness of being "women" that is common, but, rather, the consciousness of being silenced women and of a desire for another life which is found in these stories, including her mother's hidden diaries. This focus on telling as a feminist epistemology ties the novel's thematic preoccupations with its formal features and indicates that the novel's act of writing and reading as *A Woman Is No Man* is a form of participation in the feminist project the novel is promoting.

4.5 Diaspora, Racialization, and the Limits of American Feminism

The novel's interaction with the American context of its characters' lives is always mindful of how the systems of American racism and Islamophobia thwart any simple story of feminist liberation through immigration. Rum's women are not liberated from patriarchy by the move to America: rather, in many ways, it is made more potent by the community's racial or cultural defensiveness.

The sociological analysis of Nadine Naber (2012) is relevant here at the very least. Naber is documenting how Arab-Americans have reacted to a racial othering occasioned by the post-9/11 era, turning the policing of gender norms into evidence of cultural authenticity and moral value, in a society suspicious of Arab culture. This process is obvious in the Adam family, where Isra and Deya are pressured to be "good" Arabs and assimilate to patriarchy because the family must uphold its "good" Arab image in the American Arab community, which serves as a vehicle of psychic survival in the face of racial hatred.

The novel therefore resists the story, common in Western feminist and liberal discourses on Muslim and Arab women, of the assumption that immigration to the U.S. leads naturally to feminist emancipation. Instead of being a feminist utopia, American society is depicted as a terrain of its own hierarchies of race, class and gender that intersect with and do not simply supplant the male hierarchies the characters bring with them. Deya's

access to education is not simply an American gift but something she has to fight for, against the resistance of her family and the lack of choice provided by the economic and racial barriers.

Such a focus on the interrelated nature of American and diasporic oppression makes the novel a part of a tradition of what Grewal and Kaplan (1994) refer to as "scattered hegemonies," the dispersed and overlapping forms of power that comprise transnational patriarchy. As in Mohanty's own feminist politics, a politics of resistance to these dispersed hegemonies must attend to their specificity and the way they are interconnected, and not a feminism that takes gender out of race, class, and colonial history.

5. Conclusion

Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* is a complex and ambitious piece of literature and political writing. The novel is tripartite in its structure, uses silence and storytelling as feminist strategies, and is concerned with the intersection of patriarchy, diaspora and racialization, all of which contribute to its importance in the growing body of literature by Arab-American women, and equally to its productive and theoretically sophisticated dialogue with the discourses of transnational feminism and postcolonial theory.

As this article has claimed, the novel's most important theoretical achievement is its rejection of the universalistic stance of Western liberal feminists and uncritical cultural relativism. The novel thus asks for a global-feminist approach to politics, both in terms of structure and practice, and locates Palestinian-American women's oppression in its historical, geopolitical, and cultural context without ever depicting it as a natural expression of Arab culture. The women in the Adam family do not only exist as objects of Arab patriarchy they exist as objects of Palestinian occupation, American immigration regimes, racial othering and diasporic communal defensiveness all of which need to be considered in any feminist analysis of them.

Another important aspect of the novel's treatment of silence and story-telling as means of feminist resistance is its contribution to the current debate on subaltern agency in postcolonial feminist theory. The novel complicates in the total silence proposed by post-structuralist Spivak (1988), but it also does not wish to believe in the easy optimism that would make women's resistances enough to make a difference in the face of the structural violence they suffer. Isra's death and Deya's partial freedom are not a triumphant story but rather a realistic view of the potential and limitations of feminist consciousness in overlapping structural oppression.

A Woman Is No Man came out at a moment when the world has started talking about representation, intersectionality and the boundaries of Western feminism in a post-MeToo and Black Lives Matter world. Rum's novel adds a particularly Arab-American, particularly postcolonial perspective and particularly diasporic voice to that conversation, a voice that insists not only on being a part of the feminist dialogue, but on a reconfiguration of the terms of that dialogue. In this way, the novel is not simply a subject of feminist literary criticism, but also an exercise in feminist literary politics, a narrative that will be told in the hope that someone, somewhere, is listening.

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