



Exploring Feminist Consciousness in the novel *Outside Women* by Roohi Choudhry

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of feminism in *Outside Women* by Roohi Choudhry. The novel brings together the stories of two women who live in different centuries and regions but share similar experiences of displacement and marginalization. Sita, an Indian woman taken to South Africa as an indentured labourer in the nineteenth century, struggles against colonial exploitation and patriarchal control. Hajra, a present-day Pakistani academic, leaves her homeland due to political unrest and social pressure, facing emotional and cultural challenges in exile. Through their interconnected narratives, the novel highlights how women's lives are shaped by power structures that operate through gender, race, class, religion, and nation.

The study argues that the novel presents feminism as a continuous process of questioning injustice and reclaiming identity. Rather than portraying women only as victims, the text shows them as resilient individuals who survive trauma, preserve memory, and assert their voices. By revisiting neglected histories and personal experiences, the novel challenges traditional accounts that often exclude women's perspectives.

Using the theoretical approaches of postcolonial feminism and intersectionality, this paper examines how different systems of oppression overlap and influence women's realities. It suggests that understanding women's struggles requires attention to historical context as well as social and cultural conditions. Ultimately, *Outside Women* promotes the importance of memory, solidarity, and self-expression in resisting silence and rewriting forgotten histories.

Keywords: Feminism, Post-colonialism, Migration, Patriarchy, Women's Agency, Memory

Introduction

Feminism in literature examines how women's lives are represented in relation to power, identity, and social structures. It studies the ways in which literary texts portray women's struggles for equality and question the systems that limit their freedom. Feminist criticism also seeks to recover women's voices that have been silenced or ignored in mainstream



history and culture. Over the years, many novels have explored how women resist injustice, redefine their identities, and challenge traditional gender roles. Roohi Choudhry's *Outside Women* stands within this tradition by presenting female characters whose lives unfold across different historical periods but are connected through shared experiences of marginalization.

The novel links the nineteenth-century story of Sita, an Indian woman sent to South Africa as an indentured labourer, with the contemporary narrative of Hajra, a Pakistani academic who migrates due to political instability and violence. Although separated by time, geography, and circumstance, both women experience exclusion shaped by patriarchy, colonialism, religion, and national politics. Their lives reveal how systems of power operate differently across history yet produce similar patterns of control over women's bodies, labor, and voices.

The title *Outside Women* carries symbolic meaning. It suggests women who exist outside dominant institutions—outside authority, outside social respectability, and outside official historical records. However, the novel does not present this position as purely negative. Instead, it shows how marginality can become a space of awareness and resistance. Women who are placed “outside” often develop new perspectives and strategies for survival.

This paper examines feminism in the novel through key themes: colonial oppression, migration and identity, silence and voice, intersectionality, intergenerational connection, and feminist narrative structure. Using postcolonial feminist and intersectional frameworks, the study argues that the novel presents feminism as survival, memory, solidarity, and resistance across time.

Feminism and Colonial Oppression

Sita's narrative unfolds during the period of British colonial rule when the indenture system replaced slavery as a source of labor. After personal loss and environmental disaster, she becomes part of this system and is transported to South Africa. Although indentured labor was legally different from slavery, it often involved harsh working conditions, restricted movement, and limited rights. Workers were bound by contracts they barely understood, and many suffered physical and emotional hardship.

For Sita, oppression functions on two levels. First, she is exploited economically as a laborer within the colonial system. Her work is controlled, and her value is measured primarily through productivity. Second, she experiences patriarchal domination within both colonial and community structures. As a woman, she has little authority over her own body, marriage, or mobility. Her identity is shaped by expectations of obedience and sacrifice.

The novel portrays how colonialism and patriarchy reinforce one another. Colonial authorities control labor and land, while patriarchal systems regulate family life and gender roles. Women like Sita become doubly marginalized. Their suffering often remains undocumented because historical records focus on male laborers, administrators, and political leaders.



Yet the novel does not depict Sita solely as a passive victim. Her resistance is subtle but significant. She survives in hostile conditions, forms emotional bonds, and retains memories of her homeland. Her endurance becomes a form of quiet defiance. The narrative suggests that survival itself can be a feminist act when systems are designed to erase or silence women.

Through Sita's experience, the novel critiques colonial history for ignoring women's contributions and pain. It also challenges the idea that resistance must always be dramatic or violent. Sometimes, resilience, memory, and emotional strength become powerful tools of survival.

Migration and Identity

Migration is central to both Sita's and Hajra's stories. However, the reasons for their displacement differ. Sita migrates because of colonial exploitation and economic necessity, while Hajra migrates due to political violence and social extremism in her homeland. Despite these differences, both women experience the emotional impact of leaving familiar environments and confronting uncertainty.

Migration disrupts identity. For Sita, the journey to South Africa separates her from language, culture, and community. She must adapt to new social hierarchies while preserving fragments of her past. For Hajra, migration involves intellectual and emotional negotiation. As an academic, she questions political silence and confronts cultural expectations placed upon women.

The novel portrays migration as both painful and transformative. Displacement brings loss, but it also creates opportunities for reflection. Hajra's research into indentured women becomes a bridge between past and present. By studying forgotten histories, she connects with Sita's world and discovers deeper understanding of her own identity.

Migration thus becomes part of feminist awakening. When women move across borders, they often gain new perspectives on social norms. They begin to question traditions that once seemed unquestionable. The process of adapting to new environments can encourage independence and critical thought.

Through parallel narratives, the novel suggests that identity is not fixed. It evolves through experience, memory, and resistance. Feminism in this context is not only about rights but also about redefining selfhood in changing circumstances.

Silence and Voice

Silence is one of the most powerful themes in the novel. Historically, women's stories have often been suppressed due to fear, shame, or social pressure. In Sita's time, colonial systems and patriarchal norms limit women's ability to speak openly. Their experiences are rarely



recorded in official documents. Silence becomes both a survival strategy and a sign of oppression.

Hajra faces a similar dilemma in the contemporary setting. She must decide whether to speak against political violence and injustice. Her struggle reflects the tension between safety and truth. Speaking out can bring danger, yet remaining silent allows injustice to continue.

The novel presents storytelling as a feminist act. Writing, remembering, and researching become forms of resistance. When Hajra studies indentured women, she challenges historical silence. By uncovering erased narratives, she restores dignity to women like Sita.

Voice in the novel is not limited to public speech. It includes internal reflection, academic inquiry, and emotional expression. The act of remembering itself becomes powerful. Through memory, women reclaim space in history.

The narrative ultimately suggests that breaking silence is essential for transformation. Although risky, speaking out allows women to challenge oppressive systems. Silence protects in the short term, but voice creates long-term change.

Intersectionality: Gender, Religion, and Politics

The novel illustrates how women's experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power. Hajra's identity as a Muslim woman in a politically tense environment complicates her struggle. She must balance personal faith with critical awareness of how religion can be misused by extremist forces.

Importantly, the narrative does not condemn religion itself. Instead, it critiques political manipulation that restricts women's freedoms. Hajra demonstrates that women can maintain spiritual identity while questioning injustice. Her character challenges stereotypes and highlights complexity.

Intersectionality helps explain these layered experiences. Gender intersects with class, nationality, religion, and race. Sita's oppression is shaped by colonial race hierarchies and economic status. Hajra's challenges emerge from political and cultural contexts. Neither woman's experience can be understood through gender alone.

By presenting intersectional realities, the novel emphasizes that feminism must consider multiple factors. Women's struggles differ across time and place, yet connections exist through shared structures of control.

Intergenerational Connection and Historical Memory

One of the novel's most powerful elements is its movement between past and present. The dual timeline structure creates dialogue across generations. Hajra's research into indentured women symbolically connects her with Sita's life.



This intergenerational link suggests that history is not distant. The past influences present identities and struggles. Women inherit both trauma and resilience. By remembering earlier generations, contemporary women gain strength.

The novel argues that historical memory is essential for change. When forgotten stories are recovered, they challenge dominant narratives. Hajra's academic work becomes a form of feminist solidarity with women who lived before her.

Through this structure, the novel demonstrates that feminist resistance is ongoing. Each generation builds upon the courage of the previous one.

The Meaning of “Outside”

The term “outside” carries multiple meanings throughout the novel. It refers to being outside the nation, outside social acceptance, outside family protection, and outside written history. Initially, the word suggests exclusion and vulnerability.

However, the narrative gradually transforms its meaning. Being outside also allows critical distance. Women who stand outside dominant systems can observe them more clearly. Marginality becomes a position from which to question authority.

Thus, exclusion becomes empowerment. The novel redefines “outside” as a space of possibility. Women who are pushed away from centers of power can create new forms of community and understanding.

Feminist Narrative Technique

The dual narrative structure itself reflects feminist storytelling. Traditional historical narratives often focus on male political figures and public events. In contrast, *Outside Women* centers emotional experiences, domestic spaces, and personal memories.

By valuing women's perspectives, the novel challenges male-centered historiography. The blending of fiction with historical research highlights the importance of storytelling in recovering marginalized voices.

The structure encourages readers to see connections across time. It emphasizes continuity of struggle and resilience.

Conclusion

Outside Women presents feminism as endurance, memory, courage, and solidarity. Through the interconnected lives of Sita and Hajra, the novel demonstrates that systems of patriarchy and colonial power persist across centuries, though they take different forms.



Sita's survival under indenture and Hajra's intellectual resistance to political extremism illustrate diverse expressions of feminist strength. The novel argues that reclaiming forgotten histories is essential for empowerment. When women speak, write, and remember, they challenge structures designed to silence them.

By redefining the meaning of "outside," the narrative transforms marginalization into awareness and agency. Women who are excluded from dominant narratives become creators of alternative histories.

In conclusion, Roohi Choudhry's novel contributes meaningfully to feminist and postcolonial literature. It connects colonial pasts with contemporary realities and reminds readers that feminist resistance is continuous. Through memory and solidarity, women move from silence to voice, from exclusion to empowerment.

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