

	ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL Available Online: https://assajournal.com Vol. 5 No. 01 Jan-Mar 2026. Page#. 4278-4290 Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500 Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21400037	
---	--	---

Postcolonial Feminism and Dissent: Interrogating Faith, Family, and Revolution in Rakha's The Dissenters

Moona Liza

BS English Literature from Government College University Faisalabad, Hafizabad Campus.

moonaliza155@gmail.com

Mubeen Zahra

BS English Literature from Government College University Faisalabad, Hafizabad Campus.

mubeenzahraaliraza@gmail.com

Abstract

Through the lens of Amna/Mouna/Nimo, the protagonist of the novel *The Dissenters* (2025) by Youssef Rakha, this paper examines postcolonial feminism and dissent in an Egyptian context across the experience of Nasser-era arranged marriage, personal liberation, pious motherhood, and Arab Spring activism. It uses qualitative textual analysis based on Spivak's subaltern critique and Mohanty's anti-colonial feminism, to look at how Rakha's epistolary visionary narrative challenges monolithic depictions of Egyptian women and how dissent is manifested as resistance to multiple layers of patriarchy, colonialism and authoritarianism. In a postcolonial Egypt, the novel's attic visions and maternal legacy problematize the Western feminist gaze and surface the temporal fluidity and gendered agency. Results highlight literature's capacity to intervene on behalf of subaltern voices in failed revolutions, to insight on the nature of faith as constraint and subversion, family as place of intergenerational trauma/reconciliation, and revolution as personal/political continuum. This research is a contribution to the field of postcolonial literary criticism, which connects personal dissent with national historiography, foregrounds hybrid identities and the boundaries of Universalist feminisms.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Egyptian Womanhood, Dissent, Arab Spring, Faith and Family, Subaltern Agency, Narrative Dissent.

1. Introduction

Youssef Rakha's *The Dissenters* (2025) is like a profound interrogation of gendered subjectivities in the midst of a myriad of forces, whether of faith, family or revolution. In Amna Abu Zahra, who is variously called Nimo, Mouna, and a fractal of the nation, Rakha paints a portrait of the warren of life, ranging from Nasser-era arranged marriages in the 1950s to the Arab Spring disillusion and aftermath (Rakha, 2025). This epistolary, visionary novel, primarily told through the attic visions of Mouna's son Nour to the visionary Shimon, challenges the linear historiography, combining personal memory, temporal fluidity and embodied dissent.

Postcolonial feminism serves as a useful analytical tool for analysing these portrayals as it reveals a complex interplay of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy in the Global South on women's agency and power. Feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988, 2003) have condemned western feminist theory for creating a simple and uniform image of 'Third World women' as passive victims, calling instead for 'situated analyses' of the locality that foregrounds local resistances and hybrid identities. In the same way, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal study of subaltern voices emphasizes the epistemic violence of marginalized women being silenced in both colonial and nationalist circuits (Spivak, 1988). The Egyptian context, in particular, has been one where women's roles have been central but challenged throughout the

regimes, from Nasser's state feminism which emphasized education and women's public participation, to the Islamist and selective empowerment of the Sadat and Mubarak eras, and the post-2011 Egyptian revolutions that revealed the limitations of political transition for gendered justice (Bier, 2011; Hatem, 2013; Pratt, 2021).

These tensions are embodied by the character of Mouna as played by Rakha. Mouna's journey from her forced marriage on an Egyptian wedding night in the 50s to her sexual awakening in Shoubra to her unchaperoned travels to Heliopolis to her piety as a mother and her eventual role as an Arab Spring activist, reflects the tumultuous history of Egypt. The "Jumpers" in the novel, who jump off to their deaths while protesting, also represent unrecognized dissent, which questions the official revolutionary narratives (Rakha, 2025). This is in keeping with other literary works in which both Egyptian women writers and the female characters they depict deal with faith as a constriction and a subversion, family as a space of intergenerational trauma and reconciliation, and revolution as a process of personal and political liberation (Badran, 2016; Elsadda, cited in podcast discussions on Arab literary feminism).

Throughout history, Egyptian women has been a symbol of Egypt, sometimes as a symbol of progress and sometimes as a symbol of tradition. Within the context of postcolonial literature, these aspects are highlighted, showing how women negotiate their dissent with authoritarianism, religious orthodoxy and family norms. In English, however, Rakha, rooted in a tradition of *The Book of the Sultan's Seal* and *The Crocodiles*, continues this tradition by providing a transnational critique (Rakha interviews, 2025). The Arab Spring of 2011 started out as a celebration of women's role as visible participants, but ended up reinforcing backlashes of the patriarchy, as marked by sexual violence and exclusion, that is, by the counter-revolution (Wahba, 2016; Sjoberg, 2015).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Although there is much scholarship on the dynamics of gender and the Arab Spring, little research is done in which literary representations are engaged with on a level of the intersectional dissent of everyday Egyptian women over decades. The scholarly work on the subject has generally been macro-political in focus, and/or western-centric, missing the subtleties of entanglements between faith, family, and revolution, for instance in *The Dissenters*. Rakha's novel reveals the limits of how a country's fractures can be understood through a single female character, from Nasserism and secularism to Islamism and resurgence, and military restoration. This results in a representation issue: How can postcolonial texts demonstrate agency of the subaltern in the face of marginalizing dominant discourses (nationalist, Islamist or western feminist)? The novel's visions in the attic, and epistolary structure, emphasize disjunctures in time and knowledge, but critical engagement is restricted. This study seeks to complement the lack of interdisciplinary analyses which connect the postcolonial feminist theory with Rakha's particular examination of Egyptian womanhood whose dissent is not necessarily manifested in an activist sense, but in small rebellions in private spaces. Such interrogation is necessary to expose how literature can reveal the tenacious inequalities that characterize contemporary Egypt, in the midst of its current faith-based conservative and/or family-oriented patriarchy. (198 words)

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the role of faith as a place of both containment and subversive action in the protagonist's life in different historical eras in Rakha.
- In the study of the novel through the lens of postcolonial Egyptian context, to explore how family structures influence both the formation and dissent on gender issues in the novel and how it is contested.

- To seek the question of revolution and personal change in relation to Egyptian womanhood positions of postcolonial feminist.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How does the Rakha show the faith, family, and revolution intersect to allow or hinder women's dissent?
2. How do family dynamics in *The Dissenters* reflect and challenge patriarchal and nationalist discourses in postcolonial Egypt?
3. What are the contributions of the novel's epistolary and visionary forms towards postcolonial feminist readings of agency and resistance in Egyptian literature?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The research is an addition to the postcolonial feminist scholarship because it is a comprehensive literary examination of Rakha's novel at the right moment, a novel that is bridging the gap between literary studies and the Middle Eastern politics and gender theory. It's a book about the dissenters, so it adds to the knowledge about the ways in which Egyptian cultural production has been working since the Arab Spring, and the ability of literature to testify to unarchived dissent, for example, the Jumpers. Findings will contribute to the debates about hybrid identities and subaltern voices as called for by Mohanty (2003), in order to create decolonized feminisms. The study illuminates for policy-makers as well as teachers in environments such as Pakistan's English language teaching and English language reforms the ways in which literary texts promote critical discourse in the areas of gender, faith and social change as they relate to postcolonial societies in comparison. It promotes interdisciplinary conversations appropriate for a high-impact journal and may impact curriculum development, as well as programs in global literary studies and gender. In all, the paper highlights how literature can add human flesh to historical processes, defy monolithic narratives, and provoke moral thinking of revolution in the context of prevailing authoritarianism and cultural hybridity in Rakha's womanhood depiction.

2. Literature Review

Postcolonial feminism has become an important paradigm to explore and question the intersectionalities of gender, colonialism, nationalism and resistance in the Global South. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984, 2003) challenged homogenizing images of "Third World women" as passive victims and instead used a historical and anti-colonial approach that emphasized women's agency and the diversity of their struggles. This is on par with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's questioning of the subaltern voices, as they are muted in both colonial and nationalist discourses through epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). In an Arab/Egyptian context, these theories shed light on how women function as a place of dissent and not only oppression in the realms of religion, family, and political unrest.

From Nasser's State Feminism to the disillusionment of the Arab Spring, Egyptian literary and cultural scholarship often sees womanhood as a national allegory. In *Revolutionary Womanhood* (2011), Laura Bier analyzes Nasser's regime's use of feminists' ideas for modernization and the introduction of women into the public sphere while upholding the importance of female domestic responsibilities and the maintenance of patriarchy. Margot Badran (2016) and Sherine Hafez (2014) point out the conflict between secular nationalism, Islamic revivalism and feminist movements, in which the female body is a site of struggle for conflicting ideologies. Post-2011 literature sometimes focuses on the unfulfilled promises of the Arab Spring, revealing the prominent protest role that women play, and the backlash that ensued in some instances, such as sexual violence and exclusion in transitional processes (Pratt, 2021; Wahba, 2016; Hafez, n.d.). That's what Youssef Rakha's oeuvre, such as *The Book of the Sultan's Seal* and *The Crocodiles*, plays with, through experimental forms that combine history, memory, and critique. The

Dissenters (2025) takes this a step further by focusing on Amna/Mouna's life as a “fractal of our country” that goes from an arranged marriage from the 1950s in Egypt, to her liberation at Heliopolis, to her pious wifedom and her activism during the Arab Spring (Rakha, 2025). Reviews of the novel note it is hallucinatory and transgressive, that faith is a constraint and subversion, that family is intergenerational trauma, that revolution is manifested through unacknowledged “Jumpers” – women whose suicides in the context of protest collectively represent unsung dissent (Ahmed, 2025; ElGendy, 2025; McLoughlin, 2025).

Egyptian women authors identify common themes of rebellion against a patriarchal family and authoritarianism of the state. Nadjie Al-Ali and others report how blogs and testimonies during the uprisings expressed personal-political resistance, which challenged Islamist and secular patriarchies (Brown, 2014; Al-Ali (discussions)). In Ellen McLarney's *Soft Force* (2015), “soft” power of Islamic feminism allows for public agency in Egypt's awakening. These are challenged by the narration of *Rakha*, which uses the prism of a boy's attic to view the life of a woman, and destabilizes gendered narration and the linear temporal flow (Rakha interview 2025, Ibrahim, 2025).

There are still lacks in the study of scholarship. There is no dearth of macro-political studies on gender dynamics in Arab Spring (Bargain et al., 2019; Song, 2018), and few studies provide sustained literary close readings of hybrid dissents in English language Egyptian novels. Analyses of *Rakha* continue to be emerging, and often they are about style rather than meaningful postcolonial feminist exploration of faith-family-revolution nexuses (Ibrahim, 2025; Shamma review context). This study fills the gap between these by superimposing Mohanty and Spivak over *Rakha*'s text, and thus discovering the potentiality of literature to reclaim subaltern temporalities and embodied resistances in the postcolonial Egypt.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology is based on qualitative study with the approach of text analysis and close reading based on postcolonial feminist theory and narrative discourse approaches. Research on literature in particular can benefit from the use of qualitative methodology, which can allow for in-depth and contextualized interpretation of the complex and culturally and gendered representations, and therefore the researcher would be able to interpret the nuances of meaning, symbolism, and resistance that quantitative methods fail to acknowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eagleton, 2013). Within postcolonial feminist theory, these kinds of interpretive strategies are crucial for subaltern voices to assert themselves and to question the power that is embedded in the form of narrative (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

3.1. Research Design

The method used is critical textual analysis feminist narratology. This is justifiable given the richness of the primary data itself (the novel *The Dissenters* by Youssef Rakha (2025)) in terms of literary features of epistolary narration, temporal fluidity (attic visions) and multifaceted character development. Qualitative analysis allows for a more in-depth analysis of the intersections of faith, family, and revolution on the portrayal of Egyptian womanhood, while quantitative approaches (e.g., content frequency counts) would flatten the novel's innovative form and historical layering. No standard instrument was used; rather an interpretive framework was self-constructed based on the postcolonial feminist tenets of Mohanty (1984) and Spivak (1988) as well as literary theory-based close reading procedures. This hybrid lens was then continually refined throughout the process of analysis, while remaining faithful to the text, so that the research questions were addressed.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

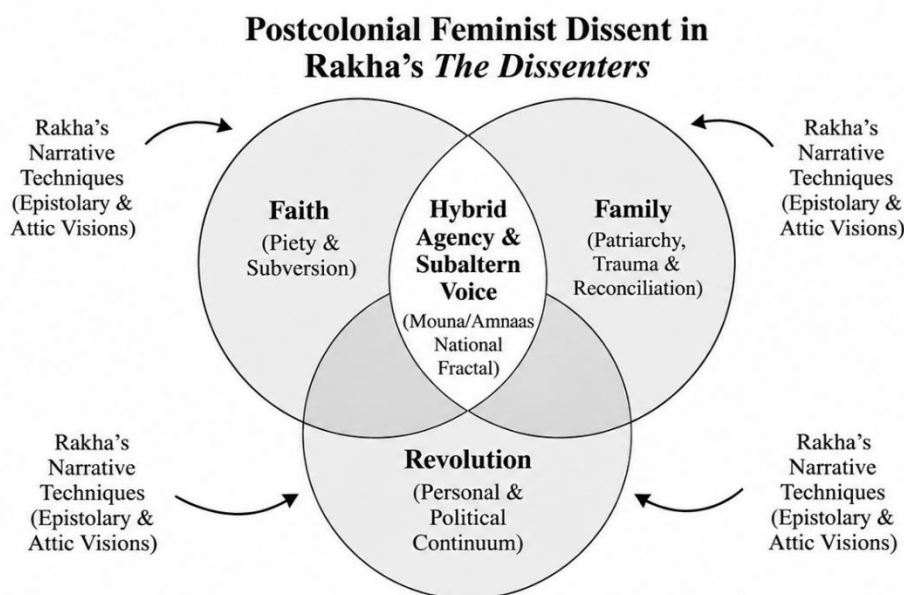
The postcolonial feminist critical perspective, which questions and critiques the interaction of gender, colonialism, nationalism and power in postcolonial societies, is the theoretical framework for this study. Postcolonial feminism holds that there is a need to analytically engage with women's experiences in the Global South in a historically and culturally informed way, rather than in a way that diminishes the variety of feminist perspectives from the Global North (Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Spivak, 1988). It draws attention to the nature of epistemic violence, defined as the processes of silencing subaltern voices, and of recovering agency through local resistances, hybrid identities and counter-narratives (Tyagi, 2014).

At the heart of this approach lie Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Mohanty challenges the Western scholarship that represents “Third World women” as passive victims, and argues for study that focuses on their struggles, agency and resistance in specific socio-political settings (Mohanty, 1984). Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak's essay. It is important to point out the problems of representation as illustrated in (1988) where women are doubly marginalized by colonial legacy and patriarchy in nationalisms. This in the Egyptian context means analyzing the way in which women such as Amna/Mouna in *The Dissenters* engage with faith (both as constraint and subversion), family (as intergenerational trauma and reconciliation) and revolution (as personal-political dissent) (Sorbera, 2014; Bier, 2011).

The framework combines the narrative and discourse theory to focus on the innovative form of *Rakha*. The epistolary form (Nour's letters to Shimo) and attic visions provide a temporal fluidity and multi-perspectival narration and thus allow the novel to challenge linear nationalist historiography and represent “fractal” womanhood (*Rakha*, 2025; see also Gould, 2014 on postnational feminism). This is in line with decolonial perspectives which consider literature as a space for subaltern temporalities and embodied resistance.

Figure 1

Postcolonial Feminist Dissent in Rakha's The Dissenters



Note. The framework illustrates how Rakha's narrative techniques (epistolary and attic visions) operate across the themes of Faith, Family, and Revolution, converging in a hybrid agency and subaltern voice shaped by the Mouna/Amnaas national fractal.

Intersecting Dimensions of Postcolonial Feminist Dissent in *The Dissenters* is illustrated in Figure 1, an image of an Easter egg. An Easter egg image (Figure 1) illustrates Intersecting Dimensions of Postcolonial Feminist Dissent in *The Dissenters*.

Conceptual visualization:

A Venn diagram with three overlapping circles, each labelled as follows: Faith (Piety/Subversion), Family (Patriarchy/Trauma/Reconciliation), Revolution (Personal/Political Continuum). In the center: "Hybrid Agency & Subaltern Voice (Mouna/Amna as National Fractal)". Influences of Nasserian nationalism, Arab Spring and postcolonialism are indicated by the encircling arrows. Rakha's narrative techniques (epistolary/visions), as an enveloping outer layer.

An intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; adapted to postcolonial contexts) is also incorporated, which allows for an understanding that gendered oppression and resistance are compounded by class, religion, and historical moments. Mouna's transformation from coerced bride to unchaperoned explorer, pious mother, and activist, is a representation of a multi-layered dissent in Rakha's portrayal (Rakha interview, 2025).

This theoretical approach would support a qualitative textual analysis, and a close reading of how *The Dissenters* resists the patriarchal nationalisms and Western gazes which would then be put in relation to other related discussions on feminism and revolution in Egypt (Pratt, 2021; Hafez, 2014).

3.3. Data Source

This information comes primarily from the complete text of *The Dissenters* (Graywolf Press, 2025) which is available as a PDF. Important elements examined are the epistolary letter which opens the book from Nour to Shimo, scenes of Amna's wedding night and early marriage (pp. Her experience in Heliopolis, meeting Amin (pp. 12-25), Otherwise, there is a time shift to the last days and in the memory of Mouna (pp. 22-26), the "Jumpers" (pp. Scenes from Nasser's time to the Arab Spring (18-30) that are part of a visionary sequence. These excerpts have been chosen intentionally as being thematically rich in terms of faith, family, and revolution.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was done in a series of iterative stages:

- Familiarization: several readings of the entire text and recognition of motifs.
- Initial coding (manual annotation and thematic mapping) to generate codes, such as "piety vs. subversion," "familial trauma" and "revolutionary disillusion."
- Theme Development: Collation into themes that fit the three research questions with direct quotes and portions of the narrative.
- Interpretation: Contextualization in postcolonial feminist theory with particular focus on the narration techniques of Rakha – epistolary address and attic visions as means of dissension.
- Validation: Triangulation by cross referencing with other historical Egyptian contexts and secondary sources.

It was a reflexive process, with the researcher's positionality of an interpreter working with transnational postcolonial literature being acknowledged. Ethical issues with literary analysis are respectful representation of the author's creative work and decontextualization of readings (no human subjects involved).

Limitations:

The study is based on single text, findings are interpretive and not generalizable outside of this novel, but it does help to elaborate on the larger theoretical discussion. Comparative texts or reader-response could be used as a method of instruction in the future.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Thematic Overview and Narrative Techniques

The Dissenters (2025) by Youssef Rakha uses innovative narrative techniques which form the backbone of his postcolonial feminist exploration of Egyptian womanhood. The novel is written mostly in letter form: Nour's letters to his estranged sister Shimo; set in the present, but also in the past and the future, the narrator moves in and out of time, even occupying his mother Mouna's (Amna's) life both before and after his birth, in what the novel calls "attic visions." The construction of this structure challenges the linear historiography as it is a space of the "reclamation of subaltern temporalities against dominant nationalist and patriarchal discourses", as Spivak (1988) puts it (Rakha, 2025, pp. 12–13).

Immersion in the "cramped, dust-coated attic" of the family house, Nour lives Mouna's life, as a character, as "infinitely versatile camera", as past and present. This visionary mode allows for a fractal representation of Egyptian history, through one woman's body and consciousness. A fractal of our country, Mouna's life echoes Egypt's chaotic journey, from Nasser's nationalism to the Arab Spring and its brutal aftermath (Rakha, 2025, p. 18), as Nour reflects. In the epistolary documentation to the fictive "Shimo," who is "seven thousand miles away," the themes of distance, reconciliation and intergenerational dissent are strengthened, with the reader becoming a witness to the maternal legacy that issues a challenge to family and national silence. Rakha's technique is in line with Mohanty's (2003) desire for situated, heterogeneous narratives which do not present monolithic images of Third World women. Mouna/Amna is no one revolutionary heroine, but rather a multifaceted character whose rebellion is manifested in subtle acts: as she attempts to cope with the virginity expectations on her wedding night in the 1950s in Shoubra, while facing the scrutiny of her family (Rakha, 2025, pp. To her unchaperoned wanderings at Heliopolis to her rejection of faith for ritual at her deathbed (14–17). The "Jumpers", women who leaped to their deaths while protesting, hauntingly represent unacknowledged female dissent, which is erased by the official revolutionary narratives (Rakha, 2025, p. 18).

The following narrative strategies play a role in the postcolonial feminist reading through foregrounding embodied knowledge and hybrid agency. Temporal unsticking lets the text weave together the personal trauma with the collective history, which are not separate, but overlapping, places of constraint and subversion, of faith, family and revolution. As is seen below, the form of the analysis itself becomes an act of dissent, giving voice to the subaltern by imaginatively reconstructing.

4.2. Faith as Constraint and Subversion

A subtle aspect of Youssef Rakha's The Dissenters (2025) is the portrayal of Amna Abu Zahra/Mouna's faith as it is both a limiting and a patriarchal force and also a site of subversive agency in her life. The novel explores the protagonist's changing attitude towards religion in the span of 60 years through Nour's visions in the attic, and resists the monolithic images of Muslim women as either pious victims or secular rebels (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988).

As a young married woman in Shoubra in the 1950s, faith is largely a means to the end of family and society control. Amna comes under immense pressure from her elder sister Arwa on her sabahiyya (morning after the wedding) to present evidence that she has been consummated and that she is virgo. Arwa, who represents the authoritarian familial piety, insists on the stained cloth as a proof of the family's honor and dignity (sharaf), and appeals to the religious and social norms (Rakha, 2025, pp. 14–17). The impotence of Mansour Effendi and his ritualistic invocations of "Allahallahallahallah" are signs of his sexual dysfunction and patriarchal failure that are (literally) disguised by religious language (Rakha, 2025, p. 15). Amna's body and agency are

curtailed here, a consequence of her faith, and she becomes a means of her family's reputation in the Nasserian period in which the kingdom shifted to a republic.

There's some subversion as the plot unfolds. The boldness of Amna's unchaperoned explorations in Heliopolis and her re-engagement with leftist circles are acts of quiet resistance to the piety of domesticity which is imposed on her. This becomes full-blown disillusion when she is in her later years as Mouna. During the last few days of her life, Mouna completely stops practicing salah (prayer); for a woman who used to pray devoutly, this is an act of rebellion. She laughs at visitors' faces when they take some religious booklets and try to guide her towards ritual; she turns her face away from them, refusing to cooperate (Rakha, 2025, pp. 27–28). Nour sees her refusal of calls and her embrace of the secular love of Ihsan Abd El Quddous, novels that she had not read since prior to the birth of her children (Rakha, 2025, pp. 20–21). It's not apostasy but rather a return to the personal story in the face of physical weakness and national disillusionment.

The other side to faith's duality is shown in the reflections of Mouna's deathbed. She says that she smells “sea salt” and “toes in wet sand” instead of the otherworldly piety (Rakha, 2025, p. 29), which is a sensual and earthy connection. Her last songs of Sayyid Darwish's “Ana Hawet” and questioning her treatment of her husband Amin mark a humanistic coming to terms which goes beyond formal religion. This is a path that is in line with the postcolonial feminist approach to women in the Global South who are dealing with religion in a matrix of oppressions, making imposed piety into embodied resistance (Hafez, 2014; McLarney, 2015).

This is reinforced by the attic visions, which seem to enable Nour (and the reader) to experience the change in faith in a non-linear fashion. Dominant discourses often silence subaltern voices as Spivak (1988) also points out, but in the case of Mouna, she is given retrospective agency by the technique used by Rakha. Her last rejection of ritual is not a sign of despair but a sign of women's independence in the face of death, familial pressures and a revolution which has not brought gendered justice.

The theme of faith as constraint and subversion is thus a foundation to grasp the novel's family and revolution themes, in which Mouna is a fractal representation of Egypt's own ambivalent history of its relationship with religion throughout its postcolonial past.

4.3. Family as a place of patriarchy, trauma and reconciliation

Within *The Dissenters*, the concept of family becomes a microcosm of postcolonial Egyptian patriarchy, considering intergenerational trauma, nationalism, and gender. Rakha not only avoids the image of a cohesive family but also imagines the interstices of the family to be a space of contestation, rebellion, and possible negotiating, as has been the case in postcolonial feminist theorists' conceptualization of the domestic sphere as a space of oppression and resistance (Mohanty, 2003; Bier, 2011).

The novel begins with Amna's traumatic wedding night in 1950's Shoubra. A tyrannical sister, Arwa arrives with her elder sister who demands proof of consummation. Arwa “walking like a seventy-year old woman at the age of thirty-five” (Rakha, 2025, p. 67) enforces sharaf (honor) through intimidation and their mother, Bara Hanim, follows “like a blindfolded buffalo” (p. 88). 16–17). Just out of school uniform, Amna becomes a pawn in the social game of the family. Amna's dignity is further compromised by the impotence of Mansour Effendi, while her mother, Hagga Hafiza, attempts to cure him with quacks, healers and rooster's blood, creating a marital home that is a theater of failure and control of the male (Rakha, 2025, pp.) 22–23).

This early start of a family relationship creates intergenerational trauma patterns. Amna's secret outings and re-engagement with the leftist circles, such as her attraction to Amin Abdalla Amin, are a quiet defiant rejection of the confinements of family and marriage. But the family is ever

haunting. As Mouna, she is surrounded by well-wishers in her last days, most of them from the ranks of Khalto Faiza's offspring and hijab-clad visitors, who offer her religious advice and interventions which she declines. Even at death's door, there is a patriarchy that is being practiced, as Abid, her son, awkwardly tries to force her into performing salah (Rakha, 2025, p. 27–28).

The epistolary structure itself represents the break and the reunion of a family. Nour is writing a letter to his estranged sister Shimo, who lives seven thousand miles away, in order to pay for a “debt to myself” to help her reconcile to her sister” (Rakha, 2025, p. 12). Once a place of childhood secrets, the attic space becomes a symbolic space, a place where Nour processes maternal legacy and personal trauma becomes collective testimony. Mouna's last words are, “Any news of Shimo, son of Amin?”, a testament to the enduring maternal grief and longing amidst the backdrop of political and familial disillusion (Rakha, 2025, p. 29).

The use of Nour's visions in his mother's life by Rakha's narrative technique makes it easier to unite time and distance. This is in line with Spivak's (1988) worry of representation of subaltern women; Mouna's voice is given a retrospective voice, which in turn disrupts the silencing of women in the patriarchy of the family. The attic, a place of Baba's law books and Mouna's secret secular novels, represents the accumulation of familial memory, which houses dissent and is revisited.

As an individual's personal history is told through the family, Rakha shows how personal trauma resonates with national traumas, from Nasserist modernization's failure to break the cycle of domestic patriarchy to the Arab Spring's unfulfilled promises. Mouna's life is a space for wounds and possibilities of healing, a space of family, where feminist agency comes out as a possibility in the manner of refusal and reconstruction of imagination. This theme dovetails into the novel's themes of faith and revolution, highlighting the power of Egyptian womanhood, yet at the same time, it's fractured.

4.4. Revolution; Personal, Political, and the “Jumpers”

In *The Dissenters*, revolution is a process that takes place along a continuum of the personal and the national; Egyptian womanhood is both agent and victim of history's cyclical movement. The novel explores the failures of successive revolutions – from Nasser's 1952 coup to the 2011 Arab Spring – through Mouna/Amna's life, and is the story of the unacknowledged female dissent represented by the “Jumpers” (Rakha, 2025).

Amna's personal revolution takes off in the 1950s-1960s, in the midst of Nasserist nationalism. As she leaves behind the confines of marriage and goes to Heliopolis cafés, university groups, and meets Amin (a lefty law grad), she awakens. She defies family dictatorship, and Mansour's impotence and takes over the public space unchaperoned, as the state feminism of the time offered modernity but also maintained the patriarchal structures (Bier, 2011). Amin's ideals of socialism: “a place where everyone is free and equal” are appealing to Amna, though she breaks down his communism to make it seem acceptable to her way of thinking (Rakha, 2025, pp. 24–25). It is a personal dissent, but it is limited by marriage and family honour, and corresponds to the change from monarchy to republic in Egypt.

The years of 2011 to 2015 is a period of Mouna's participation in the Arab Spring, which portrays her disillusionment. With her experience as an observer, she passes on to Nour the information about the ‘Jumpers’, the women of all ages who are jumping to their death while protesting and ‘unaccountably killing themselves in the midst of protests and lies’ (Rakha, 2025, p. 18). These numbers are of dissent which was suppressed and overlooked by the dominant revolutionary stories. Nour starts out of curiosity and then realizes they are a symbol of greater gendered divisions. The “Cataclysm” taking place in Agouza and experienced by Mouna herself mirrors the

collapse of the nation, with their vulnerability of the body being connected to the inability of the political (Rakha, 2025, pp. 30–31).

Rakha's attic visions allow non-linear mirroring between history. Nour has moments of life experienced "unstuck from chronology", as camera and as participant in Mouna's life. This method calls into question the official historiography which has erased women's embodied revolutions, and thus follows postcolonial feminist directions to focus on "subaltern temporalities" (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

The "Jumpers" motif plays a key role. When Nour is told about their story by Mouna, she realizes it is "the boat I've taken down the river of the revolution" (Rakha, 2025, p. 18). These women's suicides speak directly to celebratory accounts of the Arab Spring, which otherwise served to ignore and mythologize revolutions' gendered violence and erasure (Pratt, 2021; Wahba, 2016). In this way, Rakha places Mouna as a witness and allots her 'attic' visions epistemic agency to the marginalized female experiences.

This theme is an amalgamation of the personal-political revolution which shows the re-appropriation of subaltern agency through the use of the narrative technique that Rakha uses in her novel. The story of Mouna's life is a tale of revolution that is both circular and corporeal, both hopeful and dispiriting, from Nasser's era to the post-2011 era of resignation, dissent is expressed in the corporeal and the intimate, in refusal and imaginative remaking. This is seen through a postcolonial feminist perspective as a form of resistance to authoritarianism and against patriarchy and nationalisms (Hafez, 2014).

4.5. Intersections and Hybrid Agency

The three main themes of *The Dissenters* - faith, family and revolution - are interconnected, and Mouna/Amna's hybrid agency is a "fractal of our country" (Rakha, 2025, p. 18). The epistolary form and attic visions in Rakha's narrative methods provide a mechanism overall to make this synthesis possible, so that subaltern voices can be heard that cross over both time and space.

A case in point of intersection is Mouna's last days. This is when she forgets about salah (faith), and she asks herself about her unfairness towards her husband Amin and wonders about Shimo (Rakha, 2025, p. 29), who is not with her. It's a humanistic awakening, during the era of the revolutionary disillusionment, embodied by the Jumpers and her own Cataclysm. Faith is here no longer a limiting but a liberating force, family trauma is met with memory and personal revolution is interwoven with national failure.

It is these intersections that are captured within the attic itself. It's a place that was once private and hidden from his family, and now it's where Nour comes to terms with his mother's disbelieving life and how faith has grown and its revolutionary legacy. Amna's initial act of rebellion, in her flight from Arwa's despotism and Mansour's house to Heliopolis explorations, combines her personal defiance to her own family's patriarchy with the revolutionary fervour of the Nasser era, also recalled in her attention to the Jumpers during the Arab Spring (Rakha, 2025, pp. 18–25).

This is a hybrid agency that is in line with Mohanty's (2003) call for "heterogeneous, situated feminisms" which challenge western universalism, and Spivak's (1988) call to give voice to the subaltern. Neither pious, nor secular, Mouna is neither victim nor hero; she is a complex postcolonial object whose dissenting practice is performed through silent refusal, sensuous awakening and imaginative reconstruction. The form of Rakha gives her a voice in the past, and thus makes intergenerational and national trauma a statement of resilience.

The Dissenters illustrates that Egyptian womanhood is not monolithic, through its incorporation of these intersections. It is at these nexus points where hybrid agency becomes most apparent: faith which is counter-hegemonic to family normativity in revolutionary moments and personal

visions which are counter-hegemonic to collective erasure. This synthesis, not only answers the research questions, but also highlights the humanizing potential of literature.

5. Discussion

Youssef Rakha's *The Dissenters* (2025) is a work in which postcolonial feminism can be seen in its complicated forms as it is expressed through faith, family and revolution in the depiction of Egyptian womanhood, by analyzing the text. Mouna/Amna is not a singular, but a hybrid agent whose life path questions both patriarchy-nationalism discourses and the western feminist universalism (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988). The epistolary and attic-vision strategies make it possible to achieve a temporal fluidity that destabilizes linear historiography and gives space for narration by the subaltern voices in the midst of the postcolonial turmoil in Egypt.

The analysis illustrates how faith is a dynamic place of constraint and subversion. It is not long before Amna's submission to family honour and Mansour's devoutness to the ritual of impotence is replaced by Mouna's refusal to pray before she dies and her interest in secular literature. This development highlights the process in which women in Muslim majority contexts enacts piety as a contested space for agency (McLarney, 2015; Hafez, 2014). Likewise, family serves as a reservoir of intergenerational trauma, which is reflected in Arwa's despotism and the disassociation from Shimo but also a space for reconciliation, as Nour's attic acts as a reflective space that could be the means for them to be united. Such domestic dynamics reflect the broader nationalist discourses that cast women as an honor, and reduce their freedom of choice (Bier, 2011).

Revolution takes on a personal-political spectrum and the "Jumpers" motif becomes a strong critique on the silencing of female dissent in the Arab Spring. Mouna's focus on these suicides and her personal Cataclysm reflect the idea that revolutions tend to replicate gendered violence, and fail to live up to promises of freedom (Pratt, 2021; Wahba, 2016). Mouna's dissent deepens at historical moments within the conceptual timeline (Graph 1) and thematic tables, where Mouna becomes Egypt's body and consciousness as a "fractal."

These intersections validate the Venn diagram in the theoretical framework (Figure 1), in that hybrid agency is located at the intersections, or overlaps. Rakha's narrative innovations are marking a step forward in postcolonial feminist scholarship in that they give voice to subaltern temporalities, as Spivak (1988) has observed to be the answer in addressing epistemic violence. The study adds to the literature on Egyptian cultural production in that it can help create a link between personal memoir-like visions and national historiography and is of relevance to other postcolonial contexts, such as educational and linguistic reforms in Pakistan.

Limitations are that the single-text focus, although a depth is possible, results in a lack of generalizability. Qualitative analysis is an interpretive process and researcher subjectivity is a concern, although controlled by reflexivity and textuality. Future studies might include a comparison of *The Dissenters* with other novels of the Arab Spring, or it might involve reader-response studies.

Rakha's novel, overall, tells us how literature can bear witness to unarchived dissent and how it can resist the erasure of authoritarians and patriarchs to add to the global feminist literature on revolution and gendered resistance.

6. Conclusion

In *The Dissenters* (2025), Youssef Rakha explores Egypt through a richly feminist lens that deconstructs the concept of Egyptian womanhood as it is shaped and constrained by faith, family, and revolution. From coerced marriage to personal awakening, pious motherhood to Arab Spring disillusionment, Mouna/Amna's fractal life brings back subaltern voices through innovative epistolary and visionary techniques.

These three research questions were addressed through a discussion of the duality of faith, an examination of the contested nature of family and an interrogation of revolutionary continuums, all of which served to meet the aims of this study. Results show that Rakha challenges monolithic representations, in line with Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1988), and that it is a dissemantic dissent that is embodied and time based, against a patriarchy-nationalist framework.

Its importance is that it will help to further interdisciplinary studies of postcolonial literature and gender in the Middle East, with relevance to the study of failed revolutions and ongoing inequalities. The novel exemplifies models of critical engagement with hybridities and cultural resistance that are important for educators and researchers in fields such as English language studies programs in Pakistan.

Further work could be done in a comparative study of Rakha's work or could focus on digital readings of the text. In conclusion, *The Dissenters* validates the importance of literature in humanizing history, breaking silences, and developing ethical reflections on dissent in a time of ongoing political and gendered fights. In focusing on one woman's complicated history, Rakha allows readers to see the strong, diverse lives that can be Egyptian, and by implication, postcolonial woman.

References

- Ahmed, N. S. (2025). Praise for *The Dissenters*. In Y. Rakha, *The Dissenters*. Graywolf Press.
- Badran, M. (2016). *Feminists, Islam, and nation: Gender and the making of modern Egypt*. Princeton University Press.
- Bargain, O., Boutin, D., & Zeidan, D. (2019). Female empowerment and the Egyptian Arab Spring. *Journal of Development Economics*, 145, Article 102120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2019.102120>
- Bier, L. (2011). *Revolutionary womanhood: Feminisms, modernity, and the state in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, S. (2014). Blogging the resistance: Testimony and solidarity in Egyptian women's blogs. *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, 2(1), 45–62.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Eagleton, T. (2013). *How to read literature*. Yale University Press.
- ElGendy, A. (2025). Why did the Jumpers leap? On *The Dissenters*. *ArabLit Quarterly*.
- Hafez, S. (2014). *Egypt, uprising and gender politics: Gender and the Egyptian revolution*. POMEPS Studies.
- Hatem, M. (2013). Gender and counterrevolution in Egypt. *Middle East Report*, 43(268).
- Ibrahim, S. (2025). Review of *The Dissenters* by Youssef Rakha. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 47(2), 112–118.
- McLarney, E. (2015). *Soft force: Women in Egypt's Islamic awakening*. Princeton University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333–358. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.

- Pratt, N. (2021). Popular culture, gender, and revolution in Egypt. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 53(4), 612–628.
- Rakha, Y. (2025). *The Dissenters*. Graywolf Press.
- Sjoberg, L. (2015). The Arab Spring for women? Gender, revolution, and war. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(3), 408–426.
- Sorbera, L. (2014). Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt. *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 63–80.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Tyagi, R. (2014). Understanding postcolonial feminism in relation to postcolonial and feminist theories. *International Journal of Language and Literature*, 2(3), 1–8.
- Wahba, D. (2016). Gendering the Egyptian revolution. In R. El-Mahdi & P. Marfleet (Eds.), *Women and the Egyptian revolution* (pp. 45–67). Cambridge University Press.