My Memoir Betrayed Me: A Neo-Expressivist Study of The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by Farah Ahmedi

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Abstract

This paper is a neo-expressivist study of The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by a young adult Afghan refugee Farah Ahmedi. As opposed to expressivism, neo-expressivism rests on the idea that expression in writing is not of a single, authentic self but something more than this. While expressing, one is expressing something else, and is also being expressed. This paper rhetorically analyses the metaphors that the text under study uses to see what else is being expressed through the writer. The detailed analysis of the metaphors used in the text reveals the author’s ‘internalised oppression,’ and ‘double consciousness’ that create a narrative – the ‘white saviour narrative’ – other than the apparent survival story of the writer in the memoir. The study converges neo-expressivism with the postcolonial perspective of ‘internalised oppression’, and ‘double consciousness’ to complicate the use of memoir in an expressivist pedagogy classroom where personal writing is considered a window to imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development of the student writers.

Key Words: Memoir; expressivism; neo-expressivism, internalised oppression; double consciousness; white saviour narrative.

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Expressivist composition pedagogy affords students the opportunity to ‘take the responsibility of writing’ while writing ‘in their own language.’ This may encourage teachers to introduce memoir as a genre in the classroom as it fits into the definition and function of expressivism that Burnham and Powell describe in their ‘Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice:’

Expressivism places the writer at the center of its theory and pedagogy, assigning highest value to the writer’s imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior. Expressivist pedagogy employs freewriting, journal keeping, reflective writing and small group dialogic collaborative response to foster a writer’s aesthetic, cognitive, and moral development.

So, expressivist pedagogy allows the writers to express themselves in a way that their voice becomes a window to their ‘imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development.’ Memoir, in this way, is one of the suitable options for the expressivist pedagogues since it allows

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2 Burnham 115.
3 Burnham 115
instructors to gauge the maturity of their pupils through their personal writing. Composition theorist Jeannette Harris’s definition of expressivist writing as ‘loosely structured, subjective writing with a strong personal voice’ also supports the use of memoir in a composition classroom. (There are also counterarguments against the use of memoir in the classroom denouncing the genre as ‘easy’ and ‘uncritical,’ but that discussion will be out of the scope of this paper).

Where expressivists emphasise the personal and subjective in writing, neo-expressivists complicate this idea further by dismantling the binary of personal and public. Joshua Hilst in his ‘Deleuze: (Neo) Expressivism in Composition’ presents the notion of ‘expression’ as something more than mere reflection of a unified self: ‘expression is not of a subjective mind but of a whole social, textual and material field’. For Hilst, expressing the self is ‘one aspect of expression;’ other aspects include being expressed and expressing ‘something else altogether.’ Drawing on Deleuzian expressivism, Hilst explicates that ‘existence’ or ‘being’ is a ‘substance’ that ‘expresses itself in different attributes [e.g. mind and body] … these attributes then express themselves in various modes (such as this thought or that thought, this body or that body).’ To simplify it further, when I express, I am being expressed, and something else is being expressed through me unconsciously.

For this essay, I assert the usefulness of applying this neo-expressivist notion of being expressed, expressing, and something else being expressed to The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by Farah Ahmedi. I argue that Ahmedi in her memoir is not only recounting her past through her personal memory and voice, but ‘something else’, a counter narrative – the white saviour narrative – is also being expressed through her. Locating metaphors in the text and using Hilst’s term ‘palpate,’ while addressing ‘internalized oppression/colonialism’ and ‘double consciousness’ of the author, reveal the white saviour narrative. This argument in turn helps complicate the notion of using the genre of memoir in a composition classroom or as a literary genre in a literature classroom.

Ahmedi wrote her memoir as a young adult Afghan refugee in the United States (originally Ahmedi wrote her story for ABC’s ‘Good Morning America’ contest). Her memoir is a tale of her experiences as a young Afghan girl who stepped on a land mine on her way to school in Kabul. The Other Side of the Sky is the story of her survival (1). Ahmedi saw Afghanistan in crises since the day of her birth. It fell in the hands of one oppressive power (external as well as internal) after the other. She briefly refers to the different groups who ruled Afghanistan before and after her birth: there are references to the king being overthrown by a military dictator followed by Communist party rule, Soviet invasion in 1979 followed by Jihadist groups engaged in civil war, and the eventual uprise of the Taliban. There are no references to American invasion of Afghanistan, although she did refer to 9/11 as it postponed her flight to America for

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7 Hilst.
8 Hilst.
9 Farah Ahmedi with Tamim Ansari, *The Other Side of the Sky* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

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six months. Stepping on a landmine was something that later determined everything that happened in Ahmedi’s life. She was selected by a team of German doctors to be taken to Germany for her treatment because her medical situation was very grave and the doctors in Afghanistan could not help her. She spent two years there without her family and eventually returned with a prosthetic leg. On return, the circumstances were no better than before, and one day she even lost her father and sisters when a rocket landed on her house. Her two brothers escaped to Pakistan, supposedly, for fear of being recruited in the Taliban force, but she and her mother never heard about them ever again. Later, along with her mother, she too fled to Pakistan, crossing the border illegally. After spending some time there, she applied for the World Relief program that was taking refugees to the US. And on arriving the US, her life changed altogether.

Ahmedi arrived in the US in 2002 as a 14-year-old and wrote her memoir when she was 18. The time that she spent in Afghanistan, Germany, and Pakistan and later in the US developed a sense of double consciousness in her as a young adult refugee. W.E.B. Du Bois defines double consciousness as ‘a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ Closely related to the double consciousness is the idea of internalized oppression/colonialism. E. J. R. David and Derthick in their Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups sum up the concept by alluding to different postcolonial scholars thus stating:

Postcolonial scholars (e.g., Fanon, 1965; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965) argue that internalized oppression, or specifically internalized colonialism is the major psychological effect of colonialism. Fanon argues that the sustained denigration and injustice that the colonized are subjected to often lead to self-doubt, identity confusion, and feeling of inferiority among the colonized. Memmi added that the colonized may eventually believe the inferiority of one’s indigenous identity. Freire further contended that because of the inferiority attached to their indigenous identities, the colonized might develop a desire to rid oneself of such identities and to emulate the colonizer because their ways are seen as superior. Further the colonized may eventually feel a sense of gratitude and indebtedness toward the colonizer for civilizing and enlightening the colonized (Rimonte, 1997).11

Both these concepts of double consciousness and internalised colonialism are palpate-able in Ahmedi’s memoir. She is engaged, as expressivists would believe, in expressing a truthful account of her survival in an authentic, individual, subjective voice. Nancy Mack, however, thinks that while writing a memoir, there is no single subject position from which the writer writes:

The naive self who was present at the time of the experience.
The subjective self who interprets the experience as the culture would suggest.
The future self who imagines the person that the author wishes to become.

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The author self who negotiates among the other selves and constructs meaning. (58)

These multiple subject positions that Mack suggests also resonate with the aspects of expression that Hilst discusses. Mack’s ‘subjective self’ becomes a vehicle for something else to be expressed – cultural expectations in this context. It also reflects internalised cultural constructs. Ahmedi does negotiate among all these ‘selves’ and, as a result, her memoir is not merely an account of her survival (‘the naïve self’) but of an individual who has internalised oppression and who looks at herself from others’ eyes (‘the subjective self’) and who wants to assimilate into the foreign culture (‘the future self’).

Daniel F. Collins in his ‘From the Personal to the Social’ also brings forth the notion of the relationship between the personal and the social in composition.12 In the article, Collins refers to the composition pedagogies of several prominent expressivists who believe that the personal and the social are intertwined in writing. While commenting on Mary Rose O’Reilly’s composition pedagogy, Collins observes that she ‘escorts students from the idiosyncrasies of the personal to the checks and balances of the social.’13 Similarly he quotes Robert Yagelski who believes: ‘When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us. Therein lies the transformative power of writing.’14 Peter Elbow, according to Collins, ‘considers expressivism as a form of discourse that addresses the ways in which interested parties engage other interested parties, all the while identifying (and checking and modifying) our individual and collective stakes in the matters at hand.’15 Ahmedi’s act of writing in a way that pleases the American audience can clearly be seen in this light. In Afghanistan, the role of America is that of an oppressor who has invaded the land after 9/11 to teach a lesson to the so-called terrorists. Ahmedi, while living in the US as a refugee, is at the mercy of the American government who has protected her from the Taliban in her own country and from a wretched existence as a refugee in Pakistan. Having accepted the US as her saviour, Ahmedi’s narrative pays tribute to the American government and the people who have so wholeheartedly accepted her. In Collins’ terms, Ahmedi’s writing is personal made public where she acknowledges the world she inhabits so that when she writes it is ‘in a way that heals [her relationship with the US], and not a way that wounds’.16

This expressivist idea of the connection between the personal and the social is complicated when the matter at hand is a memoir written by a refugee or an immigrant. There is nothing novel about the idea of considering one’s audience when writing, but it is a considerably different situation when the writer belongs to a marginalised or oppressed group and the audience belongs to the centre. ‘Writing back’ is also not an unfamiliar phenomenon, as postcolonial discourse brims with resistance literature; however, writing is more problematic when it conforms to the expectations of the centre. Ahmedi’s memoir, just as it fits Mack’s multiple ‘selves’ in a memoir, also fits Collins’ understanding of an expressivist writing. But the text also problematises the act of memoir writing and enters the realm of new-expressivism.

While conforming to the expectations of the society that Ahmedi inhabits, the memory that

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13 Collins 123-4.
14 Collins 125.
15 Collins 126.
16 Collins 123.
she recalls does not necessarily represent her personal authentic voice that would represent her true identity as an Afghan. Her voice has been shaped by the double consciousness that is result of the internalised oppression. So, when she expresses, she is being expressed and something else is being expressed through her. Victor Villanueva in his “Memoria” is a Friend of Ours’ argues that there is

the need to reclaim a memory, memory of an identity in formation and constant reformation … memory of an identity as formed through the generations … the need to reclaim and retain the memory of the imperial lords, those who have forcibly changed the identities of the people of color through colonization.17

Villanueva here acknowledges that assimilation occurs but one should try to reclaim the past while realising that one has been forced to assimilate into the dominant culture. In Ahmedi’s narrative, however, this realisation seems to be absent because of internalised oppression.

I have tried to locate this absent realisation through heaven/hell metaphors that Ahmedi uses in the text. Michael Osborn claims, ‘archetypal metaphors are grounded in prominent features of experience.’18 If Ahmedi’s metaphors are grounded in her experience, it is fairly safe to hypothesise and easy to ‘palpate’ that Ahmedi exhibits double consciousness that is the result of internalised oppression constructing a white saviour narrative. The title of Ahmedi’s memoir *The Other Side of the Sky* is significant and symbolic. It constructs the dichotomy of heaven and hell and heaven and earth – metaphors that permeate the entire narrative. She recounts that as a child she always wanted to know ‘what lay on the other side of [her] city. [She] never dreamed that [she] would see [her] home reduced to rubble and would end up living on the other side of the world, in the suburbs of the city called Chicago’ (1-2). Her life in Afghanistan is the life of ‘losses,’ but her life in America is that of ‘tremendous gifts’ (2). So from the very beginning we see the heaven versus hell metaphors at work. Heaven stands for all the good that she receives, first in Germany in the form of her prosthesis and later in America in form of a safe life. Hell stands for her life in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and all the miseries associated with that life.

The first scene in the memoir that takes her back to her past is her carnival visit with her dear friend Alyce and her husband John. While sitting on Gondola ride, ‘the machinery sent off some kind of spark … I dropped from a trapdoor to some other reality. Suddenly I wasn’t in America on a carnival ride. I was on the ground’ (5). The parallel positioning of ‘America’ and ‘ground’ and the word ‘dropped’ between these holds significance as in the first few pages of the memoir, the reader is prepared to understand the metaphors and expect them to recur throughout the narrative. America is ‘high’ like heaven as dropping down from that high position brings her to the ‘low’ position: the ‘ground’ that is her past life in Afghanistan. In the same scene, when she is on the ‘ground,’ she is helpless but when she realises she is actually in America she is relieved that ‘Alyce was there to save [her] life’ (6). Concluding this episode, she explains: ‘My mother and I are safe now. We have good food and decent shelter and I have a dear friend’ (7). So attached to the overarching metaphors of heaven and hell are series of related binaries where everything positive is heaven – America (or Germany in some instances) and everything negative is hell – Afghanistan or Pakistan. So if we try to make a list, it would be somewhat like

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this: Heaven/hell, America/Afghanistan, high/low, sky/ground, West/East, hope/hopelessness, benevolence/malevolence, safety/danger, modernity/tradition, freedom/entrapment, and emancipation/oppression.

As already mentioned, Ahmedi relates the series of crises Afghanistan has been through. She was born in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, so the process of internalising the oppression and colonialism and internalising the white saviour myth was initiated even before she was born. As a child in Afghanistan, she was told the tales of early invasion of Afghanistan by Russian troops and, not surprisingly, those tales are told as if those were good days that Afghanistan saw.

Afghanistan was going through great changes at the time. Kabul was becoming a modern city. My mother used to tell me how it was in the capital when she first moved there, and later too when the Russian occupied the city. In those days, she said, city women went to work outside the home. They wore stockings instead of the traditional baggy pantaloons. They didn’t wear veils or even head scarves. They appeared on TV, where they read the news, sang songs and even performed dance. (21)

Modernity relates to Western ways of life, and it clashes with the traditional Afghan way of life. The mujahideen who were fighting against the Russian rule were seen with hatred and contempt because their rebellion caused the Russians to attack the villages. Russian soldiers were thought to be friendly, and Afghans were ‘not particularly afraid of the Russians’ (23). Ahmedi was growing up in Afghanistan in a family that was already struggling with the dualism of modernity and tradition where modernity stood for Western ways of life, that Russian occupation inculcated in part and tradition stood for indigenous identity that was looked down upon.

In those days my father made a Western-style outfit for my mother. He told her, ‘Don’t wear a headscarf anymore. Cut your hair, be modern.’ But my mother was a traditional woman, and on this point she refused to go along with her husband’s wishes. ‘I won’t do it,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be a modern woman’ … It was all part of the conflict between an old way of life and a new way of life. My father leaned toward modern ways. He wanted to be part of a new, socially modern Afghanistan. (21, 25)

In a memoir, the writer is looking back at the past but he/she cannot escape the current ‘self’ that the person is. So the past is looked at from the eyes of the present self. Ahmedi’s six or seven year old ‘naïve self’ is not as visible as her ‘subjective self’ who is aware of the circumstances in which she is writing the memoir, who has internalised the oppression from a young age and who cannot escape the double consciousness that the text exhibits in the form of the central metaphors of hell/heaven.

Looking at the colonial/imperial ‘centre’ as advanced, modern, and ‘better’ is habitual for those who have internalised the oppression, so, as a result, the oppressed have a ‘stake in their subordinated identity’.19 Ahmedi’s life changed when she stepped on a land mine when she was seven-year-old. After getting severely injured, she was chosen to be taken to Germany for treatment. She considers herself to be ‘fortunate that [her] situation was so grave’ (51) because at the Afghan hospital they told her that the ‘Germans were [her] one and only hope’ (50). So the German doctors are seen as ‘saviors’ who are ‘good,’ ‘wonderful’ (51), ‘smart, those German

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19 Pyke 557.
Ahmedi’s decision to go to America was the ‘saviour’ (198) in the heaven called America: ‘as soon as she saw how much we needed, she took it upon herself to save our lives, and I do not use the word another (203). The moment Ahmedi arrived in the US, she was expecting every type of material good from the people around her. There is a long list of things that she received step by step: ‘public aid,’ ‘food stamps,’ ‘payment for being disabled,’ ‘a telephone,’ ‘some fun,’ ‘pots and pans, dishes, and

21 Friere 47.

cooking utensils,’ ‘clothes that matched the style of this country,’ ‘television,’ ‘a Mercedes-Benz’ (185-235).

Internalised oppression and sense of inferiority also leads toward assimilation. Looking at one’s self from the eyes of the oppressor creates the desire to be like the oppressor and creates difference within the members of the oppressed groups. Schwalbe et al. refer to this phenomenon as ‘defensive othering.’

Having internalised the Western discursive practices, the oppressed take part in perpetuation of the discourse that portrays the oppressed as ‘racially and culturally subhuman, deficient and vile.’ In Ahmedi’s memoir, the desire to assimilate into the culture of the West and ‘defensive othering’ is manifest through metaphors. Head scarf and ‘chadari’ are referred to as symbols of conservatism and oppression done by Taliban. There are long details of troubles that she faced when she had to wear chadari. Western clothes on the other hand stand for liberalism and emancipation. After going to Germany, she soon felt the desire ‘to be the part of their wonderful world’ and the means to that was ‘wearing the same kind of clothes as the people around [her]’ (64). Later, when preparing to go for America, they were shown orientation videos and Ahmedi devotes some space to tell the reader that they were ‘warned’ not to wear ‘long head scarves and chadaris’ as they could ‘strangle’ them in escalators (158). So head scarf and chadari, the very obvious symbols of otherness, are considered troublesome. The first step for Ahmedi then was to get rid of her traditional dress code. ‘We had our head scarves, our veils of modesty, wrapped tightly around our heads and chins and shoulders. In Pakistan, wrapping ourselves this way gave us some anonymity, some protection from stares. Here, dressed in this manner, we stood out like ants in a sugar bowl. No one else looked the way we did’ (169). And later after discarding her traditional dress code she exclaimed: ‘American clothes made us feel so much safer in public’ (198).

There are numerous places when Ahmedi distances herself from her mother, indulging in ‘defensive othering.’ A very significant scene in the memoir is when her mother refused to eat turkey on Thanksgiving considering it non-halal (202). Ahmedi never uses the plural pronoun ‘we’ in this episode. So there is clear distancing between herself and her mother, although eating only halal meat (when animal is slaughtered according to Islamic rules) is essential for every Muslim. Similarly, when she returned from Germany as a nine-year-old, she felt separated from the entire family and saw them as primitive as they ate while sitting on the floor with their hands. The very colours of the house annoyed her; in short ‘[her] home embarrassed [her]’ and ‘[her] family’s way of life now seemed primitive’ (74-6). All these instances are to reinforce to the audience of her memoir that she is not like her other family members. She is more like her American audience now.

Toward the end of her memoir, Ahmedi still seems to be struggling to assimilate fully in the American culture, and she uses her memoir as a platform to demand this incorporation.

Maybe we embarrass them [Americans] … we are also ashamed of our situation – of being so dependent, impoverished and out of place … we are ashamed that we don’t know English very well … we don’t want to take the first step because we assume we’ll be rejected … why should an American kid who has everything want to waste time with a poor refugee? … but here is something I want to say in this book: it’s hard for us to reach out to you; we, with our

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clumsy English. I want to say don’t be afraid of us – you have to understand: *We are afraid of you.* We want to make friends but you have to take the first step … invite us in. (226-7)

As stated previously, Ahmedi wrote this memoir as a tale of survival, and she declares in the prologue that ‘it is the story of many people … so many people have stepped on land mines, so many have gotten hurt by war, have lost their families, fled their homes’ (2). This analysis shows that this is not all that she has expressed in this memoir. The other things that were ‘expressed through her,’ recalling Hilst’s claim, are part of her narrative. The detailed study of the heaven and hell metaphors that Ahmedi has used shows that memoir, as a genre, is not necessarily a true expression of one’s voice. There are other voices that escape through the writer. As young as Ahmedi is at the time of writing, she is probably not aware of these other voices. The realisation that Villanueva suggests is somehow missing. While reclaiming the memory of her transformation, she is not aware, or at least does not show that awareness through her memoir, that she is perpetuating her oppression by letting the white saviour narrative escape through her.

Going back to Collins’ idea of ‘healing the wounds,’ Ahmedi’s memoir does the job. She clearly has the American audience in mind and the underlying white saviour narrative of her memoir strengthens the sense of superiority of the dominant West. Having experienced reading *The Other Side of the Sky* in a youth adult literature classroom and seeing the response of the American YA readers, I was not surprised to find that the group was unable to, or not willing to, understand my interpretation of the text, and they saw it as a perfect non-fiction young adult survival text. They also had their justification to support their viewpoint but that is just one side of the picture – one aspect of expression. They could see the ‘naïve self’ who suffered and survived, but they could not see the ‘subjective self’ who has internalised the oppression so much so that her survival story became a contributor in perpetuating the dominant discourse, hence conforming to the expectations of the society.

This case study also questions the affordances of the use of memoir writing in an expressivist pedagogy classroom. Jean Bessette in her ‘Past Writing: Negotiating the Complexity of Experience and Memory’ recognises that recalling a past event from memory does not stand for telling the truth because memory is ‘dynamic’ and it keeps changing because of the experiences of the present and ‘such understandings of memory upset calls to represent experience as individual, authentic, chronological, and linear.’24 However, Bessette still considers it a useful activity in the composition classroom because ‘memory writing offers a unique opportunity for critical analysis of students’ social and political locations’ (80). Bessette’s argument thus far is understandable – that memory writing or a memoir would still be a window to ‘students’ social and political locations’ (80), but the complication that the current study brings forth is: what good does such a memory writing do to the student who has ‘internalised oppression’ and exhibits ‘double consciousness’? Bessette also acknowledges, while quoting Maurice Halbwachs, that ‘the mind reconstructs under the pressure of society’ (qtd in Bessette).25 So what does a refugee, like Farah Ahmedi, produce when writing from the memory under the pressure of the society? I contend that, in such a case, personal writing or writing from the memory is problematic for both the student writer in a composition classroom and the student reader in a literature classroom. Bessette stresses the importance of using the experience

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25 Bessette 81.


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‘critically’ so that one is aware of the ‘ideological system’ in which one experiences and later recalls the experience. This resonates with Villanueva’s point earlier referenced. A critical understanding of the situation in which one is writing and a realisation that one is writing under the pressure of the society is crucial for memoir writing, and when both of these ingredients are missing, the memoir serves to perpetuate the oppression, instead of giving an expression to the identity of the writer.

This case study has complicated the notion of using memoir in an expressivist classroom. However, the study has only laid bare the challenges and complications one may come across in a teaching and reading situation or in a writing and reading situation. The ways to cope with the situation can be taken up in another study.

The study has also brought into light, as Karen D. Pyke asserts, a neglected aspect of the postcolonial discourse in composition and literature: internalised oppression. Pyke lays bare the challenge of writing about internalised oppression. She discusses in detail the reasons for the lack of the study of internalised oppression and traces the roots of misconstrued understanding of internalised oppression as ‘blaming the victim.’ She presents a counterargument that it is actually the ‘theoretical fixation’ with the concept of ‘resistance’ that ‘mystifies and normalizes domination.’ Discussing internalised oppression does not reinforce the inferiority of the oppressed because it is not the result of ‘cultural or biological characteristic of the subjugated. Nor is it the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, or other shortcomings of the oppressed.’ So while studying the metaphors to dig out the internalised oppression of the author that creates and perpetuates the white saviour narrative, the purpose is not to highlight that the oppressed are inferior. On the contrary, the study reinforces the importance of the discussion of internalised oppression in the mainstream postcolonial discourse so that it can be seen as another hazard of domination. The study also implies that while using such texts in the literature classroom, the teacher should be aware of the ideological baggage that such texts may carry.

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