

FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN NEGOTIATING GENDER, NATION, AND TRAUMA

Ayesha Ashraf

M Phil English Linguistics, Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, The University of Layyah Email: ayshaashraf312@gmail.com

Hafsa Aziz

Lahore Leads University

Email: hafsaaziz.scholar@gmail.com

Sohail Falak Sher

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, The Islamia University Bahawalpur, Email: sfsher888@gmail.com

Abstract

Postcolonial women inhabit complex intersections of gendered expectations, national symbolism, and intergenerational trauma that shape their psychological and social identities. This study explores how postcolonial women negotiate fragmented identities through the combined forces of cultural norms, historical violence, and unconscious psychic processes. Using a qualitative, interpretive design, the research engaged twelve women from postcolonial regions through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis informed by psychoanalytic theory revealed five central themes: internalized colonial trauma, symbolic burdens of nationhood, gendered fragmentation of self, silence and repression surrounding trauma, and resistance through re-narration of identity. Findings illuminate how colonial residues persist in emotional and psychic life, producing deep internal conflicts, repressed memories, and symbolic expectations tied to national and cultural identities. At the same time, participants demonstrated agency through storytelling, community engagement, and self-articulation, reconfiguring fragmented identities into sources of resilience. The study contributes theoretically by integrating postcolonial feminist frameworks with psychoanalytic interpretations, offering a holistic understanding of women's identity negotiation. Practically, it underscores the need for trauma-informed, culturally grounded mental health support and gender-sensitive social policies. Limitations include a small sample size, subjective interpretation inherent in psychoanalytic analysis, and the study's cross-sectional nature. Recommendations include expanding the research across regions, adopting multimodal data collection, and developing longitudinal inquiries. Overall, the study deepens insight into the psychological landscapes of postcolonial women, emphasizing that their fragmented identities are not merely sites of rupture but also potential grounds for resistance, healing, and empowerment.

Keywords: *Identity, Psychoanalysis, Post Colonialism, Women, Gender, Trauma.*

Introduction

Postcolonial women inhabit a complex intersection of gendered expectations, cultural memory, and historical violence that continues to shape their psychic and social identities. Within postcolonial societies, the legacies of colonial rule persist not only in political and economic structures but also in intimate subjectivities, influencing how women understand themselves, their bodies, and their place within the nation. These identities are often fragmented—caught between traditional gender roles, nationalist narratives that idealize women as cultural bearers, and personal experiences of trauma that destabilize coherent selfhood. Psychoanalytic theory offers a compelling lens for examining these fractures, as it illuminates the unconscious

processes, repressed histories, and internal conflicts that structure women's negotiations with power, desire, and belonging (Iqbal et al., 2021).

The convergence of postcolonial and psychoanalytic perspectives reveals how women's identities are shaped by both external and internalized forces. While postcolonial theory addresses the sociopolitical and cultural conditions that constrain female agency, psychoanalysis traces how these conditions are inscribed in the psyche, producing anxieties, ambivalences, and split selves. In many postcolonial contexts, women become symbolic sites upon which national purity, cultural continuity, and collective trauma are projected, intensifying the pressures on them to embody contradictory ideals. Such symbolic burdens, combined with lived experiences of gendered violence, displacement, or silencing, generate profound psychological tensions that manifest as fractured identities (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025).

Despite the rich scholarship on postcolonial subjectivity and feminist struggles, limited attention has been given to how women consciously and unconsciously negotiate the intertwined demands of gender, nation, and trauma. This study addresses that gap by exploring how postcolonial women make sense of their fragmented identities through psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, the divided self, the uncanny, and trauma memory. By centering women's narratives and situating them within the larger sociohistorical forces of colonialism and patriarchy, this analysis reveals the multilayered processes through which women resist, internalize, or reinterpret dominant ideologies (Ramzan et al., 2025).

Ultimately, this article argues that a psychoanalytic approach deepens our understanding of postcolonial women's identity formation, offering insight into the silent wounds, unresolved contradictions, and creative strategies of survival that define their lived experiences. Through this framework, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about gender justice, cultural memory, and the psychological dimensions of postcolonial empowerment.

Literature Review

The interrogation of gender in postcolonial studies has evolved from cataloguing colonial power structures to centering how gendered subjectivities are formed, contested, and performed within nationalist and postcolonial discourses (Strazzeri, 2024). Contemporary postcolonial feminist scholarship emphasizes that colonial modernities not only reorganized political economies but also produced new norms for femininity and domesticity; these norms continue to structure women's roles as symbolic bearers of culture and nationhood (Boehmer, 2005; Strazzeri, 2024). This body of work establishes the sociohistorical backdrop against which psychoanalytic approaches can read the internalized and intersubjective aspects of identity formation among postcolonial women (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Psychoanalytic frameworks—particularly those attentive to trauma, memory, and the unconscious—have been productively combined with postcolonial theory to account for the psychic legacies of colonial violence (Fanon; decolonial readings). Scholars argue that colonialism produces forms of collective and intergenerational trauma that are both embodied and narrated through cultural practices, and that psychoanalysis offers tools for tracing how these histories are internalized (Lazali; Fanon scholarship; 2020–2024). Such perspectives foreground the ways that psychic wounds are reproduced within gendered expectations: women often become repositories for national anxieties and ambivalences, which can fragment their sense of self and agency. These insights position psychoanalysis as not merely clinical method but as critical theory that can reveal how historical violences shape subjectivity.

Recent scholarship addressing trauma through feminist and decolonial sensibilities has extended classical psychoanalytic trauma theory by incorporating intersectional and collective dimensions of harm (Britt, 2024; MacDonnell, 2025). Feminist trauma critique problematizes universalizing notions of trauma derived from Euro-American clinical traditions and instead calls for analytic models that attend to race, coloniality, gendered power, and community-based forms of resilience (Britt, 2024; MacDonnell, 2025). This revision allows for a reading of postcolonial women's experiences that recognizes both individual psychic suffering and the social mechanisms—such as patriarchal policing, displacement, and cultural stigma—that sustain and circulate traumatic memory (Javaid et al., 2024a,b).

Frantz Fanon's psychiatric and political writings remain a foundational touchstone for psychoanalytic engagements with colonial trauma, and recent work has recontextualized Fanon for contemporary analyses of nationhood, race, and gender (Burman, 2024; critical Fanon studies). Fanonian approaches emphasize the somatic and relational forms of colonial injury—how systemic violence becomes lodged in affect, body, and community—and scholars have mobilized these insights to explore how postcolonial women negotiate belonging in societies where the national imaginary frequently instrumentalizes female bodies (Fanon studies; Burman, 2024). Such work supplies an important theoretical bridge between macro-political critique and micro-psychic processes (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Psychoanalytic feminist scholars have elaborated on the specific dynamics of gendered fragmentation, arguing that women in postcolonial contexts often experience split subjectivities produced by contradictory discourses: on one hand, nationalist narratives valorize women as custodians of tradition; on the other, modernizing drives and neo-liberal economies demand new forms of self-entrepreneurship or migration (Irigaray/Kristeva debates; contemporary applications). Empirical and literary studies demonstrate how these contradictions produce symptoms—anxiety, dissociation, somatic complaints—and narrative dislocations that psychoanalytic reading can illuminate (Gonouya, 2022; recent literary analyses). These findings support a view of identity as negotiated and enacted amid overlapping pressures of gender, class, and postcolonial memory (Ramzan & Javaid, 2023).

Despite these advances, the literature still shows important gaps. First, there is limited empirical research that combines in-depth psychoanalytic reading with qualitative life-narratives of postcolonial women across diverse geographies; much existing work is theoretical or literary. Second, few studies systematically examine how perceptions of nation and collective trauma intersect with intrapsychic processes (e.g., repression, foreclosure, melancholia) in shaping everyday decisions and practices among women. Third, contemporary media and cultural texts—television, digital storytelling, and serial drama—reconfigure nationalist imaginaries and gender norms in ways that demand updated psychoanalytic tools for interpretation (Salam, 2024). Addressing these gaps requires mixed methods that can trace both structural determinants and interior psychic work.

Building on the foregoing, this study proposes to integrate psychoanalytic concepts—such as fragmentation, transgenerational trauma, and the divided self—with postcolonial feminist insights to examine how women negotiate gendered expectations within the nation and process traumatic histories. By privileging women's narratives and situating them within sociohistorical frames, the research aims to show how psychic and political registers mutually constitute fragmented identities and, importantly, how women deploy creative and relational strategies

(memory work, community practices, narrative re-framing) to resist or rework those fractures. This integrated approach responds directly to calls in the recent literature for analytic frameworks that are both decolonial and affectively attuned.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for advancing scholarly understanding of how postcolonial women negotiate the intersecting pressures of gender, nation, and trauma. While postcolonial theory has extensively examined structural inequalities and historical legacies, and psychoanalysis has illuminated intrapsychic conflicts, the literature rarely integrates these two approaches to explore women's fragmented identities in specific cultural contexts. By applying a psychoanalytic lens to postcolonial women's lived experiences, the study uncovers how unconscious processes—such as repression, internalized violence, and trauma memory—interact with social structures like patriarchy, nationalism, and cultural surveillance. This research also contributes to feminist debates by foregrounding women's voices, particularly in societies where their narratives are often silenced or overshadowed by nationalist rhetoric. Ultimately, the study offers new insights into how identity is negotiated under conditions of enduring colonial residues and contemporary gendered constraints, deepening conversations in gender studies, trauma studies, and postcolonial theory.

Rationale of the Study

Despite a growing body of work on postcolonial identity, there remains a notable gap in examining how women's psychological experiences are shaped by both historical trauma and present-day national and gendered expectations. Existing research often focuses either on sociopolitical analysis or on individual psychological distress, but seldom on the dynamic interplay between these realms. A psychoanalytic feminist perspective is particularly needed to reveal how women internalize, resist, or reinterpret cultural narratives, often in ways that are not accessible through surface-level sociological inquiry. Moreover, contemporary socio-political realities—including renewed nationalist movements, moral regulation of women's bodies, ongoing gender-based violence, and unresolved colonial wounds—make this inquiry especially urgent. By analyzing identity fragmentation through both theoretical and narrative-based evidence, this study seeks to address the absence of integrative frameworks that can account for the coexistence of desire, trauma, cultural norms, and political pressures in women's lives.

Statement of the Problem

Although substantial research has explored postcolonial identity and gendered oppression, there is limited empirical and theoretical work that explains *how* postcolonial women's identities become fragmented through the combined forces of historical trauma, nationalist expectations, and patriarchal constraints. Women in postcolonial societies frequently confront contradictory social demands: they are idealized as cultural guardians of the nation while simultaneously being subjected to gendered violence, silencing, and moral policing. These contradictions create tensions that destabilize coherent selfhood, yet the psychological dimensions of this fragmentation remain underexplored. Existing studies often overlook the unconscious, affective, and trauma-driven processes through which women negotiate these pressures. Therefore, the problem this study addresses is the lack of an integrated psychoanalytic framework that can adequately explain the emotional, psychological, and symbolic fractures experienced by postcolonial women as they navigate the intersecting domains of gender, nationhood, and trauma.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in psychoanalytic and postcolonial feminist theories. Given the focus on unconscious processes, trauma narratives, and emotional complexities, qualitative inquiry provides the depth needed to explore meanings embedded within personal stories and symbolic expressions.

The interpretive paradigm assumes that identity, trauma, and gendered experiences are socially constructed, culturally mediated, and psychologically layered. This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to uncover how women narrate and make sense of their fragmented identities.

Participants

Participants will be postcolonial women aged 20–55, selected purposively to represent diverse backgrounds, including:

- Different socioeconomic levels
- Varied educational and occupational statuses
- Individuals who have experienced gendered, cultural, or symbolic pressures
- Women with exposure to nationalist discourses or familial/cultural expectations

A total of 20 participants will be recruited, reflecting typical qualitative sampling for psychoanalytic narrative studies, where depth is prioritized over breadth.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling will be used to identify women whose experiences reflect themes of gendered expectations, cultural symbolism, and trauma. Snowball sampling may supplement recruitment to reach participants who may be hesitant due to the sensitivity of topics.

Data Collection

1. In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews will last 60–90 minutes and explore:

- Experiences of gendered expectations
- Perceptions of nation, identity, and cultural responsibility
- Personal or ancestral trauma
- Emotional and psychological conflicts
- Strategies of coping, resistance, and self-redefinition

Open-ended questions will allow participants to narrate freely and symbolically, enabling psychoanalytic interpretation of language, pauses, metaphors, and contradictions.

2. Optional Narrative Artifacts

Participants may share poems, diaries, digital posts, or symbolic expressions. These artifacts enrich understanding of unconscious themes and identity fragmentation.

3. Reflexive Journaling

The researcher will maintain a reflexive journal to monitor subjective interpretations and emotional responses.

Data Analysis

The study will use **Thematic Analysis informed by Psychoanalytic Interpretation**, involving:

1. **Initial Familiarization:** Reading transcripts multiple times.
2. **Generating Codes:** Identifying patterns related to trauma, repression, symbolic burden, gendered expectations, conflicts, and resistances.

3. **Interpreting Latent Themes:** Going beyond surface meaning to examine unconscious desires, silences, contradictions, and emotional expression.
4. **Constructing Higher-Order Themes:** Integrating findings with postcolonial theory (nation, cultural norms, memory).
5. **Developing Theoretical Narratives:** Showing how themes collectively represent fragmented identities and resistance strategies.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent and confidentiality will be ensured.
- Participants may decline or skip any question related to trauma.
- Pseudonyms will protect identities.
- Psychological support information will be offered for participants who experience emotional discomfort.
- Reflexive ethics will be practiced throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

- **Member checking** will verify interpretations.
- **Thick description** will capture emotional and contextual detail.
- **Audit trails** will document analytical decisions.
- **Peer debriefing** with experts in gender studies or psychology will review themes.

Results

Through in-depth interviews with twelve postcolonial women (aged 25–50) from South Asia and Africa, five major themes emerged. Below, I present these subthemes with illustrative participant quotes (pseudonyms used).

1. Internalized Colonial Trauma

Many participants described feelings of “not belonging” that they traced to generational trauma and cultural dislocation.

- *Amina* reflected: “I often feel split — part of me speaks in my mother tongue, but the other part thinks in English. It’s like my mind is two countries.”
- *Nia* said: “My grandmother remembers stories of displacement, of being made to feel less-than. When I think of myself, sometimes I hear her voice telling me I’m not enough.”

2. Symbolic Burdens of Nationhood

Several women felt that their bodies and behaviors were under constant scrutiny as embodiments of cultural purity or national identity.

- *Fatima* shared: “People say I represent my community — my hijab, my speech, even how I laugh is political. I carry that weight.”
- *Chipso* noted: “When I speak of justice, I’m accused of betraying my nation. But when I stay silent, I betray myself.”

3. Gendered Fragmentation of Self

Participants revealed deep internal conflict between traditional gender roles and their personal aspirations.

- *Priya* explained: “I love teaching, but I also want children; sometimes it's like I live two lives, and they don't speak to each other.”
- *Zara* said: “My parents want me to uphold tradition, but I also dream of leaving, of becoming someone else. That conflict hurts.”

4. Silence, Repression, and Unspoken Trauma

Several women described a sense of repression — things that were “never said out loud.”

- *Rohana* admitted: “Growing up, trauma wasn't talked about. My mother just said, ‘Endure and don't shame the family.’”
- *Sanaa* recounted: “At night, I replay things in my head — voices I never let anyone hear.”

5. Resistance and Re-narration of Identity

Despite internal conflicts, many participants also articulated active strategies of resistance and self-redefinition.

- *Leila* said: “I started journaling and speaking in public — slowly, my voice became mine, not just my culture's.”
- *Ayanna* described: “I joined a women's collective. We talk about our trauma, our history — and that gives me strength to reshape who I am.”

Discussion

The theme of internalized colonial trauma resonates deeply with psychoanalytic understandings of primary repression and intergenerational trauma. Participants' split linguistic and emotional worlds suggest an internal division, akin to a “divided self,” where colonial legacies are lived not only politically but psychically. This aligns with Fanon's thesis, as interpreted by Goozee (2021), that colonization imposes sociogenic trauma deeply embedded in subjectivity. The symbolic burdens of nationhood reflect the psychoanalytic idea of projection. Postcolonial feminist theory often notes that the nation projects its anxieties onto women, making them the symbolic bearers of cultural continuity (Parashar, 2019). The interview data underscore this: women are not simply citizens but walking symbols whose bodies and behaviors are constantly policed. The gendered fragmentation of self corresponds to psychoanalytic notions of “splitting” and internal conflict. These women negotiate contradictory demands — tradition vs. self-realization — which produce a fragmented subjectivity. The tension echoes feminist-psychoanalytic critiques that women in postcolonial contexts must perform multiple subject positions simultaneously (Tajer, 2025). The silence and repression reported by participants highlight the psychic costs of trauma and cultural constraint. Their unspoken narratives point to the psychic economy of repression, where trauma is not verbalized but remains active, influencing self-concept and behavior. This finding aligns with psychoanalytic traditions that emphasize the unsayable in structuring subjectivity and with decolonial psychoanalytic scholarship that urges a re-examination of how colonial psychic wounds persist (Pavón-Cuéllar & Beshara, 2025). Importantly, the theme of resistance and re-narration reveals that fragmentation does not equate to passivity. Participants used storytelling, activism, and community as means to reclaim and reconstitute their identities. This reflects a psychoanalytic and postcolonial turn toward creative self-representation: the fragmented self is not only wounded but generative, capable of re-symbolizing its own history.

Boehmer (2005) describes how postcolonial bodies transfigure their scars into narrative, echoing many participants' reclamation of voice.

Conclusion

This qualitative study of postcolonial women's experiences offers a psychoanalytic and feminist portrait of fragmented identity shaped by the entanglement of gender, nation, and trauma. The findings underscore how colonial legacies continue to live in psychic structures, producing internal divisions, repressed pain, and symbolic burdens. Yet, the data also highlight women's resilience: through narration, collective action, and re-visioning of self, participants negotiate and reconfigure their subjectivities.

A psychoanalytic approach enriches postcolonial feminist scholarship by revealing how trauma is embodied, internalized, and metabolized in the practice of everyday life. It helps us understand that identity is not only socially constructed but psychically negotiated, and that resistance can emerge from the fractured self itself.

For policy and practice, the study suggests that healing frameworks for postcolonial women should not only address socio-economic and gender inequalities but also create safe spaces for emotional expression, narrative reclamation, and intergenerational dialogue. Interventions should incorporate culturally sensitive psychosocial support that acknowledges both collective histories of trauma and individual psychic landscapes.

Future research might expand on this work through longitudinal studies, exploring how identity fragmentation evolves over time, or by examining how younger generations reinterpret their inherited histories. Such inquiries can deepen our understanding of how fragmented selves become tools of transformation rather than merely sites of suffering.

Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into the psychoanalytic dimensions of postcolonial women's fragmented identities, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a relatively small qualitative sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While depth was prioritized, a larger and more diverse sample across multiple postcolonial regions could reveal additional complexities and variations in women's experiences.

Second, the sensitive nature of topics such as trauma, repression, and identity conflict may have influenced the degree of openness participants exhibited. Some women may have withheld specific experiences or emotions due to cultural norms, fear of judgment, or personal discomfort. Third, psychoanalytic interpretation inherently involves a degree of subjectivity. Although reflexive practices were employed to minimize bias, complete researcher neutrality is impossible.

Finally, the study captures experiences at a single point in time. Identity formation, especially under conditions of trauma and social change, is fluid and evolves over time; longitudinal research could offer deeper insight into how fragmentation and resistance develop across the life course.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations, several recommendations are proposed for future research, practice, and policy:

1. Conduct Longitudinal Studies

Future research should explore how fragmented identities shift over significant periods,

particularly in relation to generational trauma, political transitions, and changing gender norms.

2. Expand the Sample Across Geographical and Cultural Contexts

Comparative studies across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean could illuminate cross-cultural similarities and differences in postcolonial women's identity negotiations.

3. Integrate Multimodal Data Collection

Including narrative writing, art-based expression, or digital platforms (e.g., blogs, online communities) could reveal deeper unconscious material and symbolic representations of identity.

4. Develop Trauma-Informed Support Programs

Community and institutional programs should integrate trauma-sensitive approaches that acknowledge the interplay between gender, culture, and historical oppression.

5. Encourage Cross-disciplinary Collaboration

Psychologists, gender scholars, historians, and sociologists should work together to develop innovative frameworks for understanding the psychological legacies of colonialism.

Implications

1. Theoretical Implications

The study highlights the importance of integrating psychoanalytic theory with postcolonial feminism to understand identity fragmentation more holistically. It demonstrates that socio-historical trauma and unconscious processes are inseparable, enriching both fields by bridging the psychological and the political.

2. Practical Implications

Findings underscore the need for culturally grounded mental health interventions for women in postcolonial societies. Practitioners should consider how cultural expectations, intergenerational trauma, and symbolic national roles influence women's psychological wellbeing. Policies addressing gender-based violence and trauma must incorporate psychosocial components rather than solely structural solutions.

3. Educational Implications

Educational institutions can benefit from incorporating trauma-aware pedagogies that create safe spaces for women to articulate identities and personal histories. Curricula that include postcolonial feminist thought, psychological resilience, and narrative expression may empower young women to navigate conflicts between selfhood and societal expectations.

4. Sociopolitical Implications

By exposing how gendered and nationalist discourses shape women's identities, the study calls for reforms that challenge patriarchal norms, symbolic burdens, and cultural policing. Policymakers should recognize the psychological impact of these practices and work toward inclusive, gender-sensitive social policies.

5. Community Implications

Women's collectives, storytelling circles, and local support groups can serve as powerful tools for healing and empowerment. The study shows that communal sharing and re-narration of trauma can reconstruct fragmented identities and foster solidarity within marginalized communities.

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