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Autoethnographic Orientalism and Intersectional Complicity in *The Kabul Beauty School*

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Abstract

Deborah Rodriguez's *The Kabul Beauty School* belongs to the body of Western humanitarian literature produced post-9/11 portraying the significant role of America in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This study analyzes how the memoir embodies what is conceptualized as 'autoethnographic orientalism', a critical framework that identifies how the Western subject constructs knowledge of the Orient through personal narratives that prioritize self-discovery by using autoethnographic conventions of reflexivity, participant observation, personal disclosure and affective engagement. Integrating intersectional complicity into the framework reveals the reproduction of orientalist hierarchies while claiming feminist solidarity with Afghan women. The close reading and qualitative analysis of the memoir identifies five dimensions of representational politics—memoir as an orientalist form, the autoethnographic gaze, intersectional complicity, rescue narratives and agential empowerment, and narrative blind spots. The study demonstrates how Rodriguez's observation and documentation of cultural practices reinforce colonial discourse of perceived differences and deficiencies rather than arriving at a deeper cultural understanding. The findings suggest that post-9/11 humanitarian memoirs need to employ a critical reading practice that will engage with both the empathetic dimensions of the text as well as the structural complicity embedded in them.

Keywords: autoethnographic orientalism; humanitarian memoir; intersectionality; Afghan women; cross-cultural representation; orientalism

1. Introduction

The strategic location of Afghanistan as a landlocked country and the gateway to Central Asia has subjected it to prolonged geopolitical intrusion and humanitarian crisis. The US invasion and its two-decade occupation generated an unprecedented volume of western literary and journalistic production about Afghanistan that sought to document, interpret, and render legible a society regarded as alien by the western public. Among various genres, memoirs have gained considerable popularity for their ability to project human dimensions of geopolitical conflict while offering an "essentially negative or at least neutral" perspective distinct from overtly political or ideological texts (Coe 1984, p. 14). Memoirs help readers understand the human predicament from a perspective absent in the grand narratives that usually focus on the geopolitical conflict and strategies (Avižienis 2005). However, this representational form carries a theoretical risk as contemporary memoirs are, as Yagoda observes, "resolutely focused on the self, and a certain leeway or looseness with the facts is expected" (Yagoda 2009, p. 2). This subjective orientation risks

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reproducing orientalist assumptions and cultural stereotypes not through overt prejudice but through the resolute focus on personal experiences.

Evelyn Alsultany identifies a notable rise in the sympathetic representation of Muslim cultures post-9/11, not to justify the inhumanities of war but "to project the United States as an enlightened country that has entered a postrace era" (Alsultany 2013, p. 162). Western humanitarian and aid workers, journalists, educators and feminist advocates who write about their experiences in war-affected countries like Afghanistan occupy an ambiguous position within this discursive formation. Their works claim to challenge the stereotypical representation and amplify marginalized voices but nonetheless take part in producing knowledge about the East that is constitutive of Orientalism itself. Deborah Rodriguez's memoir *The Kabul Beauty School* must be situated within this context. Rodriguez, an American writer and hairdresser, arrived in Kabul in 2002 with the NGO Care for All Foundation's humanitarian mission to Afghanistan. She spent five years in Kabul setting up a beauty school, which the memoir presents as a humanitarian initiative aimed at the economic and social empowerment of Afghan women. Her memoir chronicles what she describes as "the most unlikely story of a western hairdresser in Kabul, who helped build a beauty school for women and a life of her own amidst rubble" (Tippy Toes Mazatlan n.d.). While Rodriguez initially claims that her memoir is about Afghan women rather than about herself, describing her authorial voice as "just the voice" of her subjects, later in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 2014, she confesses that the book was fundamentally a personal narrative of self-discovery (Rodriguez 2014a). This tension between representing the other and constructing the self remains a central issue in the contemporary cross-cultural works written by western writers about their experiences in Muslim countries. Rodriguez's admission guides the analysis of the memoir's defining characteristic—the systematic use of Afghan women's sufferings and experiences as raw material for the construction of the western narrator's self. This study conceptualizes this dynamic as 'autoethnographic orientalism', a critical framework that identifies how the western subject unconsciously constructs knowledge of the orient through personal narratives that prioritize self-discovery.

Autoethnography, as a methodology, connects personal experiences to broader political, social and cultural contexts using reflexivity to illustrate intersections between the self and society (Ellis and Adams 2014; Berry and Clair 2011). This approach familiarizes characteristics of a culture for insiders and outsiders through 'repeated feeling, evidence or happenings' (Ellis et al. 2010, p. 277) producing "thick descriptions" of a culture (Geertz 1973). Autoethnographic orientalism synthesises the methodology of autoethnography with Edward Said's Orientalism, the product of the western experience in the Orient, which established and validated the Eurocentric perspective of looking at the East as though the gaze were neutral and authoritative. This synthesis is essential as the conventions of autoethnographic practices such as reflexivity, participant observation, personal disclosure and affective engagement often risk reproducing rather than dismantling orientalist epistemologies by rendering western gaze as intimate and affective and therefore seemingly beyond ideological critique.

Deploying autoethnography or Orientalism independently is insufficient to explain what Rodriguez's memoir does. Autoethnography as a methodology is valued for marking the "convergence of the autobiographic impulse and the ethnographic moment", legitimizing marginalized voices and corporeal literacy as valid forms of knowledge production (Spry 2001, p. 727). Craft, affect, reflexivity, dialogic engagement and theorizing are identified as criteria to establish autoethnography as socially meaningful and politically engaging than personal storytelling (Spry 2001). Wall (2006) complements this perspective by establishing autoethnography as a rigorous method that connects personal experiences to

cultural contexts and acknowledges the tensions over subjectivity and ethical vulnerability. Extending this further, Bochner and Ellis (2022) argue that autoethnography, though conceived as a form of resistance, challenges objectivity and considers subjectivity, reflexivity and lived experiences as valid data, describing it as "not only a methodology but a way of life" that embraces "ambiguity, contradiction, contingency and chance" (Bochner 2020; Bochner and Ellis 2022). While these studies affirm the transformative potential of autoethnography, they fail to address how autoethnographic material reproduces hegemonic power structures in cross cultural contexts especially when the autoethnographic subject is a westerner representing a non-western Muslim society as in the case of *The Kabul Beauty School*. Orientalism, supplemented with autoethnography, provides a strong analytic base to analyse texts that foreground intimacy and self-awareness while still reproducing imperial epistemologies. Autoethnographic orientalism can hold together the intimate nature of Rodriguez's cultural encounter and the structural orientalism that shapes the narrative.

The second theoretical pillar of the study is intersectionality. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights the inability of unidimensional analysis to capture the complex lived experiences of the marginalized populations (Crenshaw 1989). In the context of this study, intersectionality helps to examine the operation of multiple systems of power—nationality, race, gender and class—in Rodriguez's representation of Afghan women. Collins' concept of "matrix of domination" deepens this structural insight by showing how interconnected structures of power, race, gender, class, and sexuality produce specific forms of oppression (Collins 2015). Intersectionality thus recognizes markers of identity such as gender, race, class as "mutually constitutive" and "crucially dependent for its meaning on its relationship to the other factors with which it intersects" (Esposito 2024, p. 513). The intersectionality framework has evolved into a paradigm capable of addressing structural power in the context of geopolitics. Mohanty's critique of western feminism's universalism argues for a historically grounded and context specific analysis linking intersectionality with global capitalist structures and justice (Mohanty 2003). McCall provides the methodological precision Mohanty demands through the 'intercategorical complexity' approach that focuses on particular social groups at "neglected points of intersection . . . to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups" (McCall 2005, p. 1774). Laura Corrêa extends this further into decolonial territory and positions intersectionality as a paradigm that moves beyond single-axis analysis to deepen cultural studies by connecting theory to lived experiences and decolonial knowledge production, emphasizing its potential for transformative scholarship that privileges marginalized perspectives (Corrêa 2020). In this study, intersectionality complements the framework of autoethnographic orientalism. Rodriguez's memoir when analysed through the lens of intersectionality reveals overlapping systems of power in Afghan society and exposes the memoir's tendency to flatten the diverse experiences of Afghan women into a monolithic portrait of victimhood defined by gendered oppression.

Evaluating the text twenty years after its publication is significant because of Afghanistan's continued prominence in contemporary geopolitics and the ongoing debates surrounding the representation of Muslim women in western discourse. The Taliban's return to governance (2021) exposes the contradictions and failures of western humanitarian discourse. The drastic reversal in the lives of Afghan women since 2021 makes this re-examination pertinent as they have been systematically stripped of fundamental human rights. The formalized morality laws demand that women cover their bodies and faces in public, and their voices must not be heard in public spaces. Women and girls are barred from secondary and higher education, excluded from employment, and denied freedom of movement without a male chaperone (Tan and Ineli-Ciger 2023). These inhuman restrictions constitute 'gender apartheid', an institutionalized system of discrimination and

domination that systematically denies women their fundamental rights to ensure their continued subjugation (Bantekas and Karimi 2025); consequently, the beauty salons that Rodriguez's memoir celebrates as spaces of economic independence and empowerment are now considered illegal. These reversals reveal the limitations of the representational politics embedded in texts like Rodriguez's memoir. The representation of Muslim women in western narratives alternates between two problematic perspectives, representing them as Oriental figures torn between powers of modernity and conformity or as women with agency fighting against oppressive forces. Both these perspectives fail to capture the complexity of Afghan subjectivity. Deborah Rodriguez's memoir demands critical examination as it navigates and ultimately reproduces this representational tension while engaging with the construction of Afghan women, culture, agency and power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural engagements. A white western woman's representation invokes questions that have historically characterized orientalist discourse—the epistemological divide between Self and Other, West and East.

This study focuses on the textual representation and reads Rodriguez's memoir as a paradigmatic instance of a broader discursive pattern rather than as a reflection of author's intentions or prejudices. Rodriguez's affection for her students and the value of her humanitarian work are not interrogated but what is addressed is the epistemological framework within which the text operates. This research employs close reading and qualitative analysis of the memoir supported by a theoretical framework that integrates autoethnography, orientalism, and intersectionality. The synthesis of these frameworks helps to analyse the construction of western identity, reinforcement of orientalist discourses, and embedding of power relations within intimate personal narratives that function as cultural documentation. This multilayered approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of personal narrative's intersection with colonial discourse and explores the manner in which intimate relationships obscure power imbalances inherent in cross cultural encounters. In Rodriguez's memoir, the autoethnographic approach manifests as a process of self-discovery dependent on the systematic 'othering' of Afghan women. Autoethnographic orientalism exposes how Rodriguez constructs her identity by othering Afghan women, and intersectionality unearths multiple levels of oppression that shape Afghan women's experiences as they are represented in the text.

2. Discussion and Analysis

2.1. Memoir as an Orientalist Form: Representation of Location and Culture

Rodriguez's authoritative voice in *The Kabul Beauty School* derives from the memoir's epistemological premise that sustained personal presence and affective engagement are sufficient for cultural knowledge production. By positioning herself as the 'voice' of her Afghan subjects, Rodriguez presents the highly mediated narrative as a transparent transmission, thereby downplaying her narrative authority. As Yagoda observes, the act of writing a memoir is "self-construction" where the author interprets and constructs meaning while narrating life (Yagoda 2009). Rodriguez's representation of Afghanistan is not a transparent account of Afghanistan but a constructed narrative shaped by her need to produce a meaningful and compelling story for the western audience. The narrative that reads like an intimate cultural encounter is, as Said posits, a form of knowledge production which is not "automatically nonpolitical" (Said 2016, p. 10).

The spatial representation of Afghanistan in *The Kabul Beauty School* shows how the orientalist geographical imagination continues to be represented in western narratives. Geographical imagination refers to the ways in which dominant colonial and imperial powers construct and deploy spatial knowledge of the 'other' to maintain control (Riding and Mason 2024, p. 330). Rodriguez makes a conscious effort to refrain from offering

a romanticized picture of Afghanistan; however, the narrative still nurtures stereotyped images of militarization and tribalism. Her geographical imagination about Afghanistan is informed by books and media reports, and her expectation to see 'the scars of war' in Kabul reinforces a western spatial understanding of the East as chaotic, war-torn, dysfunctional and damaged (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 35). Kabul is described as a 'grey' city 'dense with sadness', thereby creating an affective geography that mirrors the presumed psyche of its inhabitants (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 8). The prejudiced spatial imagination prioritizes destruction and damage over complexity and reduces Afghanistan to a war-torn country. Rodriguez constructs Afghanistan by emphasizing social disorganization, urban chaos and infrastructural decay:

> The mountains jutted upward like pitted brown teeth, and the plane seemed frail against such a harsh landscape. . . I couldn't even see the mountains anymore because the air was so heavy with dust. Instead, I could see only the devastation surrounding the airport. On both sides of the runway, there were jagged holes in the ground from bombs and land mines. They looked like burst blisters, still raw and painful (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 35).

The repeated focus on destruction and technological backwardness places Afghanistan as temporally backward and creates what might be called as "ruin porn", that satisfies western expectation of third world dysfunction while normalizing the humanitarian mission that structures the narrative's arc (Lyons 2018). However, this representation of devastation conceals the layered history behind it. Kabul's destruction was the cumulative outcome of the Soviet-backed regimes (1978–1992), the Mujahideen (1992–1996), the Taliban (1996–2001), the republic governments (2001–2021) and the Taliban's return to power in 2021 (Mosamim and Villeneuve 2024, p. 262). The changing regimes destroyed the country's cultural and physical heritage and fractured the community's identity. Rodriguez's construction of Afghanistan portrays 'the scars of war' as a natural feature of the landscape instead of the outcome of specific political events.

The transformative narrative arc is structured in a way to make Afghanistan appear damaged so that the western presence there seems meaningful and transformative. The opening chapters project Kabul as backward and damaged. This portrayal is a structural requirement of the form of memoir, which highlights the problem that needs to be solved and makes Rodriguez's intervention meaningful. Rodriguez who starts as an outsider gradually becomes an insider, the 'white saviour'.

This aestheticization of damage extends beyond the narrative to the memoir's cover design and paratext. The cover depicts a veiled Afghan woman and two unveiled women in a small dome-shaped pavilion bordered by a floral arabesque design resembling nineteenth-century harem imagery. The tagline "One little beauty salon. A community of women comes together" reduces the memoir's realities of conflict and suffering into a depoliticized image mirroring the narrative's foregrounding of Rodriguez's personal transformation while pushing Afghan women's struggle into the background. The U.S. edition's subtitle, *An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, projects Rodriguez as an active agent of change who transforms Afghan women by entering their private spaces otherwise inaccessible to outsiders. On the other hand, the international edition's subtitle, *The Art of Friendship and Freedom*, points to a more liberal and uplifting story of cross-cultural sisterhood. The two distinct subtitles, targeting distinct readers, reveal how the memoir's orientalist complicity operates even through its marketing and commodification as much as through its narrative content. The literary impact of the memoir should be understood by placing it within the broader publishing success of Afghan-set narratives post-9/11. Following the immense success of Khaled Hosseini's *Kite Runner* (2003), which sold over seven million copies, international readers became more interested in stories that represented Afghanistan. *The*

Kabul Beauty School, published in 2007, entered this market reaching No. 10 on the New York Times bestseller list (Ellin 2007). The positive reception the memoir received matters because the memoir's monolithic construction of Afghan women as veiled, oppressed, victimized, and awaiting western intervention amplified its discursive impact beyond the literary sphere.

The spatial orientalism is further extended into the cultural register through Rodriguez's representation of everyday life and local customs and practices. The exoticized description of Afghan markets—colorful rugs, bags made out of camel and donkey skins, intricately painted furniture, embroidered clothes, knitted woolen gloves and socks, jewelry worn by Kuchis—commodifies Afghan craftmanship for western consumption constructing the material culture of Afghanistan as inherently exotic and worthy of western appreciation (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 51). Rodriguez ignores the specific ethnic, cultural, social and historical contexts the products are rooted in and reduces them to consumable curiosities. This commodification extends to her treatment of Afghan social diversity. In an attempt to educate the West of the cultural diversity and complexity of Afghanistan, the narrative constructs Afghanistan as a 'melting pot' and not as a coherent society (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 79). However, Rodriguez's reliance on affective personal knowledge allows the orientalist undertones appear empathetic rather than constructed or reductive.

Rodriguez's descriptions of unfamiliar customs, traditions, and rituals identify as the 'discursive residue' of colonialism, which perpetuates colonial hegemonic power structures through seemingly neutral cultural observations (Shohat and Stam 1994, p. 15). The ethnographic observations of Afghan mannerisms—the "baffling" shaking of heads and clothing—exoticize cultural practices by highlighting their differences from western norms. She reproduces orientalist gendered geographies when she notices the absence of women from public life and stresses how Afghanistan represents a man's world. Visibility and public participation are measures of a woman's agency according to western feminism (Mohanty 1984). The memoir highlights gender segregation to justify the cultural backwardness of Afghanistan and fails to exhibit an understanding of the cultural practices within the social and historical context of Afghanistan. Placing Afghanistan into the framework of western feminist discourses misrepresents the complexity of gender relations in Afghanistan and affirms the orientalist binary between progressive West and backward East.

The politics of cultural representation becomes most evident in the representation of Afghan weddings which operates through a comparative framework that positions western standards as normative. Rodriguez compares the traditional Afghan bridal makeup to that of an American drag queen: the bride wears "her body weight in eye shadow, false eyelashes the size of sparrows, monumentally big hair and clothes more bling than a Ferris wheel" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 2). She measures Afghan practices against American beauty standards deeming it unnatural. The traditional Afghan bridal look according to Rodriguez conveys the "mystique of the virgin" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 3). The bride is compared to a geisha and the bridal car, decorated with fabric and flowers, to a huge piece of cake with icing. These comparisons reveal Rodriguez's cultural limitations as she constantly searches for familiar western reference points rather than attempting to understand the practices on its own terms. Such descriptions place her as a cultural voyeur who observes cultural practices of the orient through an inherently superior western gaze.

Rodriguez's definitive claim that Afghans did not "marry for love", projects this as a central truth rather than understanding the cultural complexities and human predicament (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 9). She focuses exclusively on the transactional nature of marriage: visits of the groom's family with gifts, dowry negotiations, and describes marriage as "strictly business, a transaction enacted between fathers" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 8). The

use of the term 'virginal lamb' reveals the depth of her cultural prejudice as it compares a young bride to an animal chosen for sacrifice (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 5). The dehumanizing imagery strips the Afghan bride of agency and projects her existence solely for male consumption. At Roshanna's wedding, Rodriguez describes the family's anxious wait for proof of the bride's virginity: "I remember that this is supposed to be the proof of Roshanna's virginity: a bloody handkerchief, dropped outside the door of the consummation room" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 29). The description of the 'bloody handkerchief' that determines the woman's worth foregrounds Rodriguez's anthropological curiosity that resonates with the western stereotypes about honor cultures. Memoir's reliance on personal observation reduces culturally specific practices to stereotypes at the same time passing them as authentic knowledge.

Rodriguez's voyeuristic descriptions of traditional wedding celebration reveal the problematic nature of her gaze. The dancing and celebration of men and women are described as the expression of repressed sexuality: "They shimmy, they shake, they arch their backs and thrust their hips… they move their hands along the sides of another's bodies, sink to the floor and sway back up again, grazing cheeks, arms, hips" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 25). The voyeuristic description imposes a western framework onto cultural practices and human behaviors, denying Afghan women the dignity of cultural expression and reducing them to the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women. The cultural images that Rodriguez paints reinforce the barbarity of the society that oppresses women. Rodriguez employs Cloud's notion of "paternalistic rhetoric" that appears sympathetic to but ultimately positions itself above the Other, reinforcing power imbalances and rendering Afghan women as objects of western pity rather than accepting their cultural complexity (Cloud 2004, p. 294).

The Kabul Beauty School belongs to a broader genre of post-9/11 humanitarian memoirs—including Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2003), Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* (2011), and Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* (2006)—which, as Evelyn Alsultany argues, projects Muslim societies in a sympathetic light but ultimately reinforces the idea that the West is enlightened and the non-West needs the assistance of the West for reformation or reconstruction. Rodriguez's emotional engagement with the Afghan subject does not challenge orientalism but becomes its effective vehicle making the representation more persuasive and trustworthy (Alsultany 2013). The memoir's personal epistemological framework projects this engagement as empathetic feeling rather than ideological position thereby presenting the orientalist knowledge produced as an inevitable result of cross-cultural engagement.

2.2. The Autoethnographic Gaze: Self-Discovery Through Othering

Rodriguez's initial claim about the memoir being about Afghan women is destabilized when she admits that the book is a personal narrative of self-discovery. This admission is consistent with what the text structurally performs. The autoethnographic gaze differs from the orientalist gaze discussed in Section 2.1 in that it is a mode of self-referential looking operating through conventions of reflexivity, personal disclosure, and affective engagement. This gaze while turned outward to the cultural Other, redirect meaning towards the western self, constructing East as a mirror of subjective consciousness. The text subordinates the ethnographic understanding of the Other to the autobiographic transformation of the Self. *The Kabul Beauty School*, when analyzed through the lens of ethnography reveals complex dynamics of cultural observation, participation, knowledge production and self-discovery. Afghanistan and Afghan women do not emerge as autonomous entities but as the mirror through which Rodriguez discovers a more purposeful version of herself. This can be seen as a concentrated form of autoethnographic orientalism where the western subject, through

reflexive self-examination, charts her experiences and personal growth. Instead of interrogating her own cultural assumptions, she ultimately produces knowledge of the Orient as a by-product of self-knowledge. The memoir becomes a site to construct and reinforce the Occidental identity rather than generating genuine cross-cultural understanding.

Rodriguez, through the autoethnographic convention of personal disclosure, instrumentalizes the experiences of Afghan women as a means of self-discovery. This dynamic is visible in Rodriguez's reflection after her visit to Kabul Welayat, a women's prison. Visibly distressed after the visit, she tells her students that "it was the brave women of Afghanistan—standing strong through wars and forced marriages and so many different forms of confinement—who had inspired me to leave my troubled marriage back in Michigan. I told them that I owed my freedom to them" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 115). This framing reveals a representational asymmetry wherein the systemic limitations enforced on Afghan women—a product of the patriarchal system, Taliban governance, and decades of political turmoil—are treated as functionally equivalent to Rodriguez's voluntary decision to walk away from an unhappy marriage in the United States. Their suffering becomes therapeutic for her, creating a disturbing dynamic where their trauma becomes her empowerment. The memoir collapses this striking difference by positioning them as parallel experiences that illuminate each other.

The fire at Rodriguez's mother's house in Michigan produces a moment of purported cross-cultural understanding that reveals the autoethnographic framework's capacity to appropriate Afghan experiences rather than comprehend them. A week after her marriage to Sameer, Rodriguez receives her mother's email about the fire and goes to Michigan. The event recalls an earlier moment when she visited the house abandoned by her Afghan American friend and failed to understand the weight of that friend's loss. "I couldn't imagine that kind of loss then, but now I was beginning to understand how you feel when your family home goes up in smoke" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 135). Spry identifies the transformative capacity of autoethnography as extending to the researcher, researched and the reader by creating "efficacy and healing in their own communal lives" (Spry 2001, p. 712). However, in the memoir, this transformation is neither mutual nor communal. Rodriguez uses Afghan women's suffering as material for her personal growth. The equivalence drawn between a house fire in Michigan and decades of war and structural violence in Afghanistan is epistemologically revealing. It also demonstrates how the memoir's autoethnographic framework appropriates Afghan experiences to highlight Rodriguez's self-discovery rather than allowing the Afghan experience to exist on its own terms.

Another similar dynamic operates in the stories of Afghan women narrated in the memoir. Their experiences are narrated primarily in terms of their emotional impact on Rodriguez. This overshadows the lived experiences, and subjectivities of Afghan women. Rescuing Hama, who was sexually exploited by Ali, becomes a project of western rescue fantasy. Rodriguez plans to relocate Hama to the United States with the help of her friends; however, when Hama chooses to remain with Ali the disappointment Rodriguez felt reveals her investment in the rescue narrative rather than genuine respect for the Hama's choice and complete inability to understand the circumstances that shaped her decision. The memoir's narrative logic cannot accommodate Hama's refusal as a meaningful response to the circumstance but only as a failure of the rescue mission. This reflects what Spivak problematizes as "white women saving brown women from brown men", a formulation that positions western feminist framework as universally liberating (Spivak 1988, p. 297). The autoethnographic form facilitates Rodriguez's personal growth while Afghan women's experiences merely support the process of self-discovery.

The autoethnographic gaze is most revealing in the memoir's affective engagement, the autoethnographic convention that positions emotional investment as a mode of cultural understanding (Spry 2001). The memoir privileges Rodriguez's psychological states over those of the Afghan women whom she claims to represent. Her marriage to Sameer, sexual frustrations, cultural differences and communication failures take up substantial narrative space. These personal troubles are central to the memoir's self-discovery arc. Women at the salon console Rodriguez when she is devastated by the news of Sam's wife giving birth to a baby boy, reversing the flow of affective care with Afghan women functioning as emotional support for the western woman. Afghanistan becomes a space where she discovers her emotional and physical needs. Afghan women's lives recede into the backdrop while Rodriguez's subjectivity fills the narrative. On her arrival in Afghanistan, she is assigned trauma counselling with Afghan children. However, she does not narrate this experience in the memoir; instead, she focuses on the foreigners who came to her for hair services. This omission reveals whose subjectivity the autoethnographic gaze is capable of accommodating.

Analyzing these instances demonstrates that the autoethnographic gaze in *The Kabul Beauty School* operates through a structural logic. The conventions of ethnography like personal disclosure, participant observation, reflexivity and affective engagement are used to divert the attention from the Afghan Other to the Western Self. This is not merely a display of lack of empathy but a structural feature of autoethnographic orientalism, whereby the western narrator's identity is constructed at the expense of her subject's complexity.

2.3. Intersectional Complicity: How Rodriguez's Positionality Shapes the Gaze

Rodriguez's complicity in reproducing Orientalist representations of Afghanistan is not incidental but is produced by the convergence of her race, nationality, class, and gender. Intersectionality is therefore employed in this study as an analytical lens to trace how the intersecting axes of privilege generate and sustain complicity. The autoethnographic gaze analysed in Section 2.2 does not operate in a vacuum but is shaped by Rodriguez's intersectionality. Her representational authority is the product of her intersectional positionality as a white, cisgender, American woman, economically superior, affiliated with an NGO operating in a context where an American citizenship carries geopolitical power. Collins argues that "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins 2015, p. 1). These axes converge in Rodriguez to create an interpretative authority through which she documents and narrates the realities of Afghan women for a western audience. Spry posits autoethnography should represent the "Other with the same kind of commitment as is afforded to the self" (Spry 2016, p. 198). Rodriguez fails to interrogate the epistemological implications of her privileged positionality, a structural failure resulting from autoethnography's resolute focus on personal experiences.

Rodriguez's race and nationality confer privileges that she openly acknowledges. "Foreign women are not held to the same rigorous standards as Afghan women" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 5). The western woman in Afghanistan existed like "another gender entirely, able to wander back and forth between the two otherwise separate worlds of men and women; when we do something outrageous like reach out to shake a man's hand, it's usually forgivable and expected outrage" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 5). She positions herself as 'different' from Afghan women with her bright lipstick, heavy eye makeup, unnaturally red hair and tall stature. The physical appearance reinforces her 'differences' granting her unique privileges of freedom and mobility within Afghanistan. Her acquaintance is considered an asset "a connection to the wealth and power of America, as nearly all Afghans

assume Afghans are rich. And we are, all of us, at least in material sense" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 5). Rodriguez benefits from the convergence of her American citizenship, whiteness, and economic status as opposed to the marginalization experienced by Afghan women. Although Rodriguez acknowledges the material privilege of Americans, she does not interrogate its implication for her representational authority. These privileges transform her into an orientalist knowledge producer who "creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world" through the act of observation and documentation (Said 2016, p. 40). This mode of knowledge production is reflected in Rodriguez's fashioning as the benefactor. The memoir exemplifies the white savior complex (Cammarota 2011), projecting Rodriguez's intervention as inherently beneficial while positioning Afghan women as passive recipients rather than as women with agency.

Rodriguez's humanitarian mission is structured by her class privilege. Her decision to open a beauty school in Kabul to provide services to western customers was supported by her friends in Michigan. She receives donations from Paul Michelle, and other major cosmetic companies, and she is able to hire a consultant from New York. Later, when the school lost its funding, she sells her car to pay for the school supplies, highlighting the fact that she possesses capital assets that constitute a form of economic power unavailable to her Afghan students. The beauty school's primary source of income is the western clientele. Rodriguez designs Peacock Manor Guesthouse "to have the kinds of amenities that would make it appeal to journalists and other westerners" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 167) and Afghan women are trained to cater to the requirements of the western consumers on which the school's financial survival depends. This reproduces the economic hierarchies Rodriguez claims to challenge: rather than building a self-sustaining institution for the economic independence of her Afghan students, the school becomes merely a temporary means to cater to the needs of the westerners. Rodriguez's class privileges and her focus on personal intention prevent her from recognizing this contradiction. The autoethnographic framework of the memoir lacks the ability to see beyond the sincerity of the humanitarian gesture.

Gender is the axis that connects Rodriguez explicitly to her Afghan students. She positions herself as an ally of Afghan women claiming gender solidarity which is structured by power asymmetry. When Rodriguez is groped by a man in the market, she retaliates with a punch and drags him to a policeman. Her nationality and relative immunity from the consequences enable her to respond in a manner impossible for the Afghan women. The memoir frames this as personal courage completely overlooking the structural privilege. "I was outraged that Roshanna and all these other women had to put up with men grabbing them in the *mandai*. I remembered all those women in prison who had dared to challenge the sexual order by having a boyfriend or running away from a bad husband. Why was it that the men in the market could break the rules so easily? I remembered the scars on Nahida's back and felt a new surge of rage on her behalf" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 187). When the ministry of women threatened the beauty school operations Rodriguez wonders "Why is it that I seem to care more about these women than you do, even though I'm an American and you're an Afghan?" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 162). This question encodes the assumption of western feminism that Mohanty critiques- the tendency to construct "women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions" (Mohanty 1984, p. 337). Rodriguez's question presupposes that caring about women is a universal feminist stance, one that overlooks the power asymmetries at play.

As a result of the intersectional complicity, Rodriguez constructs Afghan women as a monolithic victim of gender oppression. The stories of Nahida, Mina, Bahar, Basheera and Shaz are structured around the same axis of gender oppression, which flattens individual agency and other ethnic and social differences. Deborah Rodriguez fortifies the

oriental representation of the nineteenth century by presenting Afghan women as a single homogenous group. Her selective storytelling creates a contradiction. Rodriguez, while attempting to reclaim Afghan women's identity, systematically 'others' them through the stereotypical, distorted and negative representation (Burney 2012, p. 62). The memoir produces the third world women as victims in need of western assistance which unintentionally reinforces western dominance rather than genuine empowerment. It privileges the agency of the European while highlighting the passivity of the Afghan, illustrating the significance of intersectional privilege in knowledge production even within spaces designed for empowerment.

Rodriguez's Orientalist and autoethnographic gaze is enabled and shaped by her intersectional positionality which in turn shapes her complicity. Her privileged positionality as a white, economically independent, American woman grants her institutional legitimacy and narrative authority which equips her to be the 'voice' of Afghan women and transform Afghan suffering into western self-discovery.

2.4. The Beauty School, Rescue Narratives and the Paradox of Agential Empowerment

The beauty school in *The Kabul Beauty School* is the memoir's primary autoethnographic site, the spatial infrastructure that enables Rodriguez's transformative self-awareness. Autoethnographic conventions converge in this space: the participant observation of Afghan women's lives, affective engagement with their sufferings, personal disclosure of Rodriguez's life and her reflexivity. Rodriguez considers the beauty school as one of the positive outcomes of 9/11 projecting it as offering a chance to empower Afghan women. This conviction reveals Orientalist assumptions about the western intervention as inherently beneficial, thereby exemplifying the dynamics of orientalist rescue paradox. The beauty school manifests the western idea of empowerment that, while aimed at helping the Afghan women, inadvertently functions as a site of cultural colonization, evident in the school's pedagogical, economic, and spatial structures. Jennifer L. Fluri associates the beauty academy in Kabul to 'western ideals of liberty and 'corporeal modernity' (Fluri 2009). In this construction, "Afghan women's bodies act as a spatial and social metaphor for deliverance by way of their manufactured transformation into a modern, western and hegemonic model of the global feminine subject" (Fluri 2009, p. 242). Though the beauty school's significance is synonymous with bodily transformation, the memoir associates it only with the economic sustainability of its students. Rodriguez does not interrogate the paradox that the elaborate hairstyling and makeup she teaches are covered under the veil or the burqa the moment the women step outside the beauty salon. Rather than critically engaging with this paradox, Rodriguez establishes the beauty school as a space where women are symbolically 'liberated' from the veil. This reflects western discourse's fixation on veiling as the primary signifier of Muslim women's oppression while overlooking the complex interplay of culture, history, tradition, and power that shapes this practice (Abu-Lughod 2013). Therefore, the beauty school is not a neutral humanitarian site but a physical one where the Afghan women's bodies, labor and agency become raw materials which facilitates the construction of Rodriguez's identity as a transformative and meaningful western presence.

The beauty school's pedagogy privileges western knowledge over the local cultural practices, with the instructor at the center acting as the beacon of knowledge to a population assumed to be ignorant of modern trends and transitions. Rodriguez's curriculum is based on western trends. Her attempt to test her student's knowledge publicly, which wounds their pride, mirrors colonial educational practices that assume local knowledge system were lacking rather than different. Rodriguez considers the inability of Afghan women to understand the concepts of color theory as cognitive limitation. Only when her friend

Suraya educates her about post-traumatic stress syndrome does she understand their difficulties and decides to adjust her teaching methods. This adjustment is understood as orientalist accommodation, a process whereby the western actor selectively engages with elements of Oriental culture while maintaining orientalist assumptions about cultural hierarchy. Even though the accommodation is real, it operates entirely within the western knowledge framework which remains the foundational template from which modifications are made. The reflexivity here is limited and operates within the same orientalist framework. Although Rodriguez modifies her methods, she does not interrogate the power politics underlying her representation of Afghan women.

The economic structure of the school extends autoethnographic orientalism from an epistemological register to a material one. The memoir, as Bose (2020) demonstrates, serves as a capitalist rescue narrative that highlights Afghan women's empowerment through micro-enterprises rather than through political or social transformation (Bose 2020). Her decision to train Afghan beauticians to cater to foreign clientele in order to generate revenue reveals complex power relationships at play in these spaces. The school depends on the foreign clients thereby transforming cultural influence into financial dependence. When the school lost its funding, Rodriguez decides to generate income by catering to the needs of the westerners in Kabul who were "eager for some pampering" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 196). The decision forces women to depend on and adapt to western expectations to achieve economic viability creating a dependency relationship where Afghan women's economic success depends on their ability to serve western clients. However, the memoir points out how the foreign customers preferred Rodriguez's services to those of the Afghan beauticians, positioning Rodriguez as a cultural mediator who can successfully bridge western expectations and Afghan capabilities. She fails to identify this as a sign of underlying hierarchy and accommodates cultural differences superficially while maintaining western cultural supremacy.

The Kabul Beauty School offers a paradoxical representation of Afghan women that both acknowledges their agency and reinforces the narrative of victimization and western superiority. Socio-economic factors such as culture, discrimination, violence, patriarchy, and lack of education have contributed to a constant and radical change in the status of Afghan women which was instrumentalized by the US and its allies to justify the invasion and frame the ensuing period as offering "a new hope for Afghan women's rights" (Mosamim and Villeneuve 2024, p. 267). This geopolitical context shapes Rodriguez's selective storytelling, as she positions her physical presence as catalysts for transforming the lives of Afghan women. The beauty school gives Rodriguez unprecedented access to the private lives of Afghan women. She occupies the privileged position of a western observer who can interpret Afghan women's experiences for the global audience. The memoir portrays the beauty school run by Americans as a refuge for native women. This framing obscures the reality that beauty schools existed in Afghan culture and community building occurred independent of western intervention. The beauty school also embodies a fundamental orientalist paradox of representing oriental women as simultaneously vulnerable and in need of saving, yet also resilient. This contradiction constructs the rescue narrative that is essential to orientalist discourses. However, western intervention is projected as what equips women with the skills necessary for survival and self-expression.

The Kabul Beauty School while foregrounding victimization narratives simultaneously attempts to project resilience and agency of Afghan women producing what Katherine Allison terms as an 'agential Muslim woman', a concept that emerged in the context of war on terror to subvert the dichotomy between the West and the East by projecting Muslim women, "marked by bravery, independence and resilient defiance" who embody the principles of Islam and 'western standards of emancipated modernity' (Allison 2013,

p. 666). Rodriguez deploys this figure consistently: Basheera seeks the help of Americans to escape her abusive Taliban husband by becoming computer literate, learning English and enrolling in the beauty school; Nahida's business acumen and her strategic planning to escape from her abusive husband unfolds within the beauty education and business models taught by Rodriguez; Bahar's transformation from a kindergarten teacher to a strong and independent beauty school graduate. However, this empowerment narrative creates a dependency in which Afghan women despite displaying steadfast determination and resilience, require western intervention and guidance for liberation. Such dependency undermines the authentic agency of Afghan women. This representational tendency is the structural requirement of the autoethnographic narrative's self-discovery arc. Rodriguez requires Afghan women to be resilient enough to inspire her transformation, while remaining dependent on her intervention, which in turn justifies her presence as a transformative force. The beauty school is autoethnographic orientalism's institutional expression where transformation of the Afghan women is inseparable from the self-transformation of the western narrator. The critique of the rescue narrative does not diminish the acute poverty and economic insufficiency Afghan women experienced under decades of conflict and patriarchal and cultural oppression. Instead, it challenges the memoir's portrayal of western intervention as the singular resolution to the conditions resulting from complex historical and political factors.

2.5. Narrative Blind Spots

The omissions that structure *The Kabul Beauty School* are the inevitable consequences of the autoethnographic orientalist frameworks this study has traced through the previous sections. This study identifies four structural limitations that define the representational boundaries of the memoir: a linguistic limitation that restricts Rodriguez's access to Afghan subjectivity, the dehistoricisation of Afghan masculinity shaping Afghan patriarchy as a timeless constant, the active erasure of the empowered past of Afghan women and the memoir's failure to assess its own ideological foundations. These omissions are not failures of observation but structural necessities of a rescue narrative. The rescue narrative that autoethnographic orientalism produces requires the patriarchal, Islamic and conservative Afghan culture to be the source of the subjugation of Afghan women, and western intervention must be projected as essential for their liberation. Most significantly, it does not evaluate Rodriguez's own ideological stance so that her humanitarian act can be seen as selfless and not as a subtle form of display of power.

Language becomes a major epistemological limitation within the narrative, shaping both Rodriguez's access to Afghan society and the limits of her representation. The autoethnographic convention of participant observation requires sustained immersion and interaction with the culture represented, and Rodriguez's limited proficiency in Dari compromises this. She is forced to depend on translators—Roshanna mediates her communication with the locals, Mary MacMakin assists in interviewing candidates for the school, Anisa bridges pedagogical gaps and Suraya helps her understand the trauma experienced by Afghan women. The constant dependence on intermediaries problematizes Rodriguez's perspectives as being influenced by their interpretations. The communicative gap is apparent at Roshanna's wedding, where Rodriguez observes, "There is much talking among the guests and families. I can't understand them because my Dari—the Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan—is not so good, and the one person in the room who speaks English well—Roshanna—isn't talking" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 28). During training sessions, she fails to follow the conversations of the students, "I wasn't really listening since I still didn't speak much Dari, but I kept hearing odd English-sounding words" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 109). Language is thus a marker of exclusion, positioning Rodriguez as an outsider unable to

grasp the social and cultural nuances of the experiences that she narrates. Moreover, her personal relationship with Sam is also greatly impacted by her lack of understanding of the local language. The time she spent with him "was sort of frustrating since he couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Dari" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 124). Her dependence on translators mediates her access to authentic Afghan voices which results in a filtered representation forcing the narrative to maintain a linguistic distance from the culture it seeks to represent. The memoir fails to acknowledge this as a limitation and proceeds as though affective engagement is sufficient for cultural understanding.

The memoir's engagement with the beauty school and Afghan women necessarily limits Rodriguez's engagement with Afghan male subjectivity. It dehistoricizes Afghan masculinity portraying it as patriarchal, inherently violent, uniformly coercive, exploitative, or absent. Afghan fathers, brothers and husbands are portrayed as enforcers of patriarchal norms and moral code of honour: Roshanna's abuse and abandonment by her betrothed, Nahida's abduction by the Taliban, Ali's exploitation of Hama, Bahar's and Basheera's abuse by their husbands. Rodriguez, in her visit to the women's prison, discovers that many of the inmates were imprisoned for challenging the sexual order by having boyfriends or running away from a bad husband. The violence Rodriguez represents, which is rooted in the patriarchal structure of the society, is real and not fabricated. However, the single-axis gender framework excludes historical and political forces—decades of invasion, wars, conflicts and psychological trauma—that shape Afghan masculinity. Rodriguez casually labels Afghanistan, 'Manistan' (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 154) which reduces Afghan masculinity as a cultural constant, justifying western intervention as corrective for a timeless society in need of rescue.

The memoir actively constructs the pre-existing beauty culture of Afghanistan as rudimentary and primitive rather than simply omitting it. Rodriguez's description of an Afghan beauty salon is highly revealing: "there was only one small, broken mirror instead of a wall of mirrors. Instead of a counter, there was a rough wooden plank . . . Raksar waved her hand proudly at the few combs, brushes, and scissors on the wooden plank. They were far from salon quality. The scissors looked like something you'd use to shear sheep. The combs looked like the sheep had been chewing on them" (Rodriguez 2014b, pp. 57–59). The inadequacy of Afghan salons is confirmed through the testimony of a western customer who recounts contracting 'some kind of bionic lice' at an Afghan salon, an infestation so severe that required industrial-strength pesticide to treat (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 44). Basheera's sustained practice during the Taliban reign is mentioned but is not developed as a counternarrative of resistance against tyranny independent of western help. To do so would be to acknowledge that Afghan women's resilience existed independently of western intervention. Rodriguez's beauty salon enters an existing cultural space, but the memoir fails to acknowledge this without undermining the foundational premise of its own humanitarian narrative.

The omission of Afghan women's resilience extends beyond Basheera's individual defiance to the broader history of emancipatory and anti-patriarchal struggles that the narrative never engages. Afghanistan's advocacy for women's rights grew out of indigenous reform movements and state-led modernization initiatives decades before the western intervention. The modernization reforms of the 1920s under King Amanullah and Queen Soraya's public unveiling initiated debates on veiling, education for the girl child, women's civic roles, and polygamy. The state-led modernization initiatives during the 1970s recentered women in public life by promoting literacy and employment for women, bringing in land reforms, political participation, and legal measures supporting equality (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women, formed in 1965, promoted literacy among women, banned forced marriages and eradicated the practice of bride price

(Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, p. 6). Similarly, RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan), an independent nationalist movement founded in 1977, exemplified counter-patriarchal and nationalist feminist politics by reconfiguring gender norms and redefining gender relations (Fluri 2008). These advances were later reversed not only because of the rising tensions and armed conflict but also because of the patriarchal structure of the society and fundamentalist forces like the Taliban who enforced restrictions on the fundamental rights of women. Afghan women's subordination has been sustained by what Moghadam terms a "tribal-based social structure in which only men have rights, equality and unlimited access to public space" (Moghadam 2002, p. 20). Afghan women's resistance, therefore, has historically been directed against indigenous patriarchal forces, while the critique of Rodriguez's memoir challenges the western rescue framework that obscures this history of resistance by attributing Afghan women's emancipation to western intervention. This challenges the memoir's assumption that agency is granted through western intervention instead of emerging from a longstanding history of indigenous resistance to patriarchal structures. Acknowledging this history would require the memoir to portray Afghan women as resilient and empowered, a representational strategy that the autoethnographic rescue narrative cannot accommodate.

Another significant omission is the memoir's failure to examine its own ideological formation. Rodriguez narrates her individual experiences and does not acknowledge or interrogate the post-9/11 feminist discourse within which her mission and narrative are placed. The memoir does not examine what it means to be an American in a country under American military occupation. Neither does it explore how the western media narratives framed her "imagination" of Afghanistan: "I imagined I would spend the month there bandaging wounds, splinting broken limbs, clambering over the rubble . . . I figured I'd be staying in a tent the whole time and wouldn't be able to take a shower, so half my suitcase was stuffed with Wet Ones so that I could tidy myself up every day behind a tree" (Rodriguez 2014b, p. 34). This preconceived imagination is not subjected to critical examination in the memoir but it structures her perception and narrative. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 reveals a crucial aspect that the memoir fails to see: the fact that the empowerment celebrated in the memoir was entirely dependent on the presence of the American military in Afghanistan, which in itself was temporary. The hope with which the memoir ends is the product of and is dependent on continued western interference. The memoir cannot envision Afghan women achieving liberation through their own agency because autoethnographic orientalism requires the western self to remain indispensable for the emancipation of the cultural 'Other'.

3. Conclusions

The study examines Deborah Rodriguez's *The Kabul Beauty School* as a paradigmatic instance of autoethnographic orientalism—a critical framework that identifies how autoethnographic conventions of reflexivity, affective engagement and personal disclosure privilege the western Self to facilitate self-discovery. By examining the spatial and cultural representations, the autoethnographic gaze and the intersectional positionality of the author, the beauty school as a site of autoethnographic orientalism and the structural omissions of the memoir, the study reveals a narrative logic in which Afghan women's suffering and resilience become the raw material for the construction of the western narrator's identity. The principal tension the study discovers is that autoethnographic orientalism is most persuasive when it is masked by empathy and intimacy. Rodriguez's concern for her students makes the memoir's orientalist dimensions more persuasive, not less. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 gives the study a historical significance. The empowerment the memoir celebrates was entirely dependent on the American military presence in Afghanistan.

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The withdrawal of the US military exposes both the fragility of liberation dependent on western support and the limitations of a discourse that is structurally unable to recognize Afghan women as subjects capable of shaping their own liberation. The autoethnographic orientalism framework extends beyond post-9/11 humanitarian narratives to any personal narrative in which a western narrator uses autoethnographic conventions to represent non-western societies. Future research may apply this theoretical formulation to analyse other post-9/11 humanitarian memoirs to determine whether the discursive patterns identified in this study represent a defining generic formation of western humanitarian writing, especially while representing marginalized populations.

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