



Silence and Brown Womanhood: Diasporic Feminist Weaving and Heterogeneity in *The Direction of the Wind*

Kakoli Debnath[†] & Binda Sah[‡]

Abstract:

The paper examines Mansi Shah's novel, *The Direction of the Wind*, through an interdisciplinary lens, focusing on how Indian diasporic brown women negotiate fragmentation, silencing, and othering. The book resists the universalist feminist readings by revealing the heterogeneity of the diasporic experiences of brown women. By centering the mother-daughter duo, Nita and Sophie, and their transnational dislocation in Paris, Shah presents a quieter but radical mode of resilience- one that is grounded in self-discovery and emotional survivability rather than reactive confrontation. The study draws on Sadie Plant's concept of 'weaving' as a feminist cybermetaphor to frame these women's acts of rethreading diasporic identities and agency by employing qualitative methodology and textual analysis. The act of 'weaving', in this context, is not digital but metaphorical, representing a form of embodied knowledge that bridges fragmented identities and personal histories. Supplemented by theoretical engagement by Spivak and Mohanty, the paper emphasizes the importance of recognizing the complexities, multiplicity, and differences in Indian diasporic brown women's lives.

Keywords: brown women, heterogeneity, Indian diaspora, silence, weaving

Introduction

Mansi Shah's novel *The Direction of the Wind* navigates the spatial and emotional dislocations encountered by a mother-daughter duo, Nita and Sophie, whose lives span India and Paris. At the heart of the novel is Sophie's search to locate her mother, who had disappeared into Parisian life years earlier without Sophie's knowledge, leaving behind

[†] Research Scholar, Department of English, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Assam, India.

[‡] Associate Professor, Department of English, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Assam, India.

a legacy of fragmented identity, unanswered questions, and silences. Nita's life in Paris is marked by quiet isolation, exoticization of her brownness, and emotional estrangement as she grapples with her Indian identity amid the alienation of being the 'other' in Paris. Such an intimate journey becomes a prism through which Shah unearths layers of generational trauma, cultural rupture, and gendered silencing. Within the feminist context, Shah resists the simplification of brown women's transnational lives into monolithic narratives.

Diasporic experience, especially for women of colour, is often framed through the lenses of alienation, estrangement, fragmentation, and loss. However, *The Direction of the Wind* resists such homogenizing narratives by emphasizing the heterogeneity of brown women's lived experiences, making it irreducible to universalist readings. Nita and Sophie embody intersecting geographies, racialized perceptions, and personal desires, challenging the reductive lens of mainstream feminist diasporic discourses. Their emotional resilience is shaped through silence and fragmentation, defies victimhood, and emerges instead as a quiet radical assertion of agency, justifying the persistent resilience of the brown Indian diasporic women. Shah, thus, recenters the margin by foregrounding the narratives of the Global South.

The paper elucidates that Shah's protagonists engage in a metaphorical practice of 'weaving'- a subtle but powerful feminist gesture that entwines memory, reconnects fragmented identities, and creates a space of diasporic resilience. Weaving here is not overtly political or vocal; rather, it is an understated but subversive feminist act that resists the frameworks that often render brown women exotic or invisible. In such a practice of weaving, everyday life becomes a site of meaning-making and defiance. By engaging with Sadie Plant's cyberfeminist critiques from Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this paper situates Shah's novel within a discourse that challenges the universalization of Third World women's experiences. Nita and Sophie emerge not as passive victims but as dynamic and evolving subjects who live, choose, and remember often quietly within and against the structures that seek to contain them. Their empowerment lies not in dramatic and reactive gestures but in their ability to live, question, remember, and quietly choose within and against the structures that seek to define them.

By adopting a qualitative methodology and textual analysis, the paper argues that *The Direction of the Wind* reimagines resilience as a sustained act of feminist survival and endurance for Indian diasporic brown women. In doing so, the paper foregrounds attention to the often overlooked delicate threads of resistance woven into the everyday experiences of transnational brown womanhood.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on diasporic women's identities has centered on marginalization, alienation, and loss. However, it has significantly expanded over the last two decades, although much of it still struggles to capture the contradictions, heterogeneity, and quieter forms of agency embedded in brown women's experience. Only a few have managed to address the quiet forms of resistance that arise from within fragmentation. Earlier feminist discourses have tended to universalize oppression and frame diasporic women through the lens of victimhood. However, contemporary feminists challenged such essentialism by foregrounding emotional labor, affect, creative resistance, and multiplicity.

Sadie Plant's *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (1997) is a foundational cyberfeminist text that directly challenges the essentialist concerns of gender by foregrounding fluidity and heterogeneity as "Species, sex, race, class: in those days none of this meant anything at all" (p. 3). Plant reframes women not as static biological subjects but as active matrices, codes, and interfaces within the technological system. By invoking metaphors as "webs of interacting blendings, leakings, mergings, weaving through ourselves" (p. 3), Plant (1997) reflects a feminist embrace of the complexity of rhizomatic being over binary structures. Among these, her metaphor of 'weaving' can transcend digital contexts where it becomes an essential symbol to map the nonlinear and intergenerational threads through which women resist dominant structures.

Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) raises critical questions on epistemic violence and critiques how Western intellectuals attempt to represent the voices of the marginalized, especially in colonized or formerly colonized nations. She critiques Western thinkers like Deleuze and Foucault and argues that "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak... the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow..." (p. 28). Such interrogation of the Eurocentric values that universalize the female experiences and the heterogeneous realities of the subaltern women makes her work foundational to the critique of binary thinking.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's chapter, "Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity" in their edited collection, *Scattered Hegemonies: Post Modernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994) makes a critical turning point in "problematizing theory; more specifically feminist theory" which tends to be "a homogenizing move by many First World women and men" (p. 2) towards "transnational cultural production and reception" (p. 2). The collection critiques the universalization of Western feminist values by foregrounding the

fluidity of women's experiences across geopolitical borders, class, and race. Sujata Moorti's *Color of Rape: Gender and Race in Television's Public Spheres* (2002) intervenes the dominant feminist discourses by demonstrating "how the categories of gender and race are represented in television images of sexual violence" (p. 3). She shows how media function as a regulatory regime that produces raced and gendered bodies through narratives of victimhood and criminality; thus her choice to examine rape narratives is "informed by feminist and critical race theories" (p. 5). This makes her work significant in illustrating resistance to hegemonic feminism through deconstruction and incorporation of intersectional analysis. Uma Narayan's *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (1997) attempts to "contest, criticize, and complicate some prevalent understandings" (p. ix) by challenging how Western feminist discourses frame nonwestern women, especially "the problematic roles assigned Indian women in attempts to 'preserve Indian cultural identity' in immigrant communities" (p. xi). Narayan deconstructs how non-Western women are cast as victims of static traditions and positions the West women as liberated and progressive. This reinforces the colonial logic, marginalization, and the complicated lived realities of women in the Global South.

Theoretical Background

The paper builds on the metaphorical act of weaving to develop an interdisciplinary feminist framework that bridges cyberfeminist and postcolonial critiques, particularly around universalism and resilience. Sadie Plant's concept of 'weaving' is rooted in cyberfeminist theory and offers a powerful metaphor for reading the subtle, embodied agency of diasporic brown women. Plant reclaims a traditional feminized craft of weaving as a radical epistemological method within the emerging digital decentralized networks. - one that crisscrosses "the complex topical landscape" and cultivates the "twin goals of highlighting multifacetedness and establishing multiple connections" (Plant, 1997, p. 11). In this light, weaving is not a passive ornamental act but a recursive expression of agency. The loom becomes a site of resistance, where nonlinear rhythms defy the masculinist coded linearity of history, logic, and authorship. Plant emphasizes this when she notes that the process "doesn't just begin with writing; it is directly related rather to the weaving of elaborate figured silks" (p. 12). Meaning is generated not through hierarchy but through interlaced threads echoing hypertextuality as a feminist form of authorship "assembled into a 'woven interconnectedness' in which strength of connections derives from the partial overlapping of many threads of connectedness" (p. 11). This metaphor collapses the binaries of body vs technology, and emotion vs intellect that position weaving as a cyberfeminist convention, both subversive and generative. More than aesthetics, it encodes autonomy into the

fabric of subjectivity woven from affect, resistance, silence, and memory into new forms of feminist knowledge.

When extended to diasporic brown women, this metaphor illuminates how their identities, technologies, histories, and emotions are interwoven across cultures, borders, and timelines. Their fragmentation and silences are not singular and static voids but layered articulations, overlapping threads of migration, culture, and memory, where weaving becomes a feminist strategy for articulating marginality, resilience, and heterogeneity.

Although Plant's conceptual metaphor celebrates decentralized forms of knowledge must be situated alongside postcolonial critiques. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty caution against the universalizing tendencies embedded in feminist discourses that obscure the complexity of Global South women's lives. While Plant foregrounds multiplicity, Spivak provides a reminder that decentralization does not automatically resolve the problem of representation for marginalized women. Her observation that "the relationship between women and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are substituted under that charge" (p. 28) challenges us to read silence as strategic and meaningful and not simply as erasure and absence. Similarly, Mohanty's (1988) critique of the construction of Third World women as a "singular, monolithic, subject" (p. 17) warns against reductive and universalized generalizations. Together, their ideas push against reductive representations and reorient our reading of agency towards everyday acts of resistance where diasporic brown women quietly weave memory, displacement, and survival into feminist knowledge that defies simplification.

Discussion

Weaving Silence and Subjectivity: Feminist Survivability in Diaspora

Central to this discussion is Sadie Plant's cyberfeminist notion of weaving- a metaphorical act tied to diasporic female agency, identity reconstruction, and a quiet subversion of patriarchy. In *The Direction of the Wind*, silence is not absence but resistance - a form of feminist survivability enacted through refusal, solitude, and aesthetics. Nita's transnational journey from India to Paris emphasizes a profound rejection of normative patriarchal expectations. Nita's decision to abandon motherhood and her role as a wife in India is not simply a disappearance but an intentional unravelling of a socially imposed identity. Her withdrawal from familial roles and immersion into the Parisian world of art metaphorically constructs a loom of resistance through which she began to weave a life rooted in survivability and artistic autonomy. Longing for a life

beyond India, Nita stares at her “tough navy-blue fabric” (Shah, 2023, p.10) suitcase that “contained little more than her paintbrushes, some family photographs, and clothing but was heavier than she had expected” (Shah, 2023, p. 11). Her decision to leave had burdened her for the “past eighteen months” or longer, “if she were being honest with herself”(Shah, 2023, p. 13), emphasizing the heartbreaking silence of abandoning her six-year-old daughter, Sophie. Nita’s silence in the face of maternal expectation reflects a strategic reconstitution of selfhood through aesthetic expression.

Her final letter to her husband, Rajiv, before departure, signals a painful articulation of self after years of silent conformity: the “*more I try to force myself into my maternal and spousal duties and repress the life I dreamed of as a girl, the more the weight of that burden crushes me*” (Shah, 2023, p. 15). This confession reveals the internalized struggle she had long repressed, one she admits she was not “brave enough to say” (Shah, 2023, p. 14) to him in person. The letter, which is not a passive medium of expression and does not evoke silence in the literal sense, resists the often confrontational and visible resistance valorized within the Western feminist discourse. Her words, “*I need to become whole. To feel in control of my life for the first time*” (Shah, 2023, p. 15), reveal a moment of self-actualization in the wake of overwhelming emotional and cultural confinement. In this act of feminist assertion, Nita claims agency within structures that had historically rendered her silent and invisible. This is how Nita weaves a subjecthood in exile, composed of quiet rebellion, where, as Spivak (1988) remarks that the “relationship between women and silence can be plotted by themselves”(p. 28). Nita’s silence becomes strategic as she navigates the intersecting forces of displacement and familial expectation, reclaiming autonomy through refusal. Her marginalized position renders her agency and pain largely unnoticed, but this silence is not submission- it is a feminist refusal of the form of expression imposed on her.

While Nita’s silence in India emerges from familial oppression, it transforms in Paris into a method of self-preservation and protection in Paris into a mode of transnational resistance that refuses to be spoken for. Paris is not an easy terrain of liberation for Nita but a densely woven, complex tapestry of brown womanhood in which her silence becomes a form of everyday defiance. Her crafted invisibility resists overt confrontation and instead functions as a tool of survival in a white Eurocentric Parisian space. When she introduces herself to Dao as “an artist” (Shah, 2023, p. 28), she sheds her prior identities as a wife and mother that once tethered her life in India. Such self-representation emphasizes the beginning of a reweaving of identity through artistic authorship.

Nita's reticence to share her past with her white lover, Mathieu by responding only to "I was ready for a change" (Shah, 2023, p. 55) when asked if she misses her life in India, her only response, is emptied of any past detail, refuses to translate the trauma of departure into a palatable narrative. This refusal emphasizes a racialized boundary between her experience and articulation highlights how silence becomes a radical act of boundary setting. Thus, Nita's journey is laced with a profound sense of moral ambiguity- her departure ruptures Sophie's life; even the art she creates bears witness to the diasporic reality of her dislocation. Caught in a quandary where she weaves visibility in a "modeling job that paid considerably more than her sessions with Simon" (Shah 95) for French art class while simultaneously being erased as Sophie's mother. Her refusal to speak of Sophie, by addressing her as her niece, is a reaction to the gendered and racial precarity imposed on migrant women. In withholding the story, Nita defies the homogenizing tropes of the "composite, singular "Third World Woman" (Mohanty, 1984, pp. 334-335) - a figure Mohanty (1984) critiques as being a "singular, monolithic, subject" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 333) constructed by Western feminist narratives. By existing within the textures of her art, the shadows of the memory of her daughter, and letters from her husband, Nita resists being reduced to a victim. Although her narrative is marked by trauma, it does not conform to a Western feminist arc of liberation; rather, it embodies a refusal to adhere to the cultural and emotional expectations imposed on her brown gendered body. Through silence, pain, and solitude, Nita's weaving reflects an intimate map of feminist survivability rooted in multiplicity and difference.

Yet these silences carry consequences, for they are not without cost. As Nita attempts to repress memories of her marriage and Sophie, they often resurface through her art. She begins to "weave Sophie into her art" (Shah, 2023, p. 117), and her guilt bleeds into her canvas. Even Mathieu observes, "She haunts you, I can see" (Shah, 2023, p. 132), exposing how her aesthetic creation becomes an unintentional maternal archive. Her loom of silence and refusal to speak of Sophie, to articulate her pain and longing, is not a failure; rather, that the world she inhabits is untranslatable in the languages available to her. In turning to art, Nita wields silence and aesthetics as tools to encode memory, longing, and guilt into visual form. Such quiet defiance of Nita mirrors Plant's vision of weaving as a feminine-coded complex mode of rewriting subjectivity. Nita's life thus becomes a hypertextual tapestry- one that refuses fixed meanings and identities and instead reflects a fluid, shifting, and self-fashioned existence.

Stitching through Absence: Maternal Rupture and Feminist Reconciliation

Sophie's narrative offers a rethreading and a counter-narrative to Nita's, reframing absence not as abandonment but as an inherited wound and a starting point for charting a postcolonial feminist reweaving of her diasporic identity. If Nita enacts silence as a feminist refusal, Sophie responds by gathering the fragments left in that silence. Her diasporic journey is a simplistic retracing but a complex affective mapping of inheritance and dislocation. Growing up in India, Sophie internalizes her mother's absence as a form of emotional legacy. Her eventual arrival in Paris is a crossing of histories, borders, and ruptures, making her journey an act of feminist rethreading shaped by the mnemonic and affective weight of the unknown. She moves through Paris with an urgency born out of longing and scattered clues- addresses, photos, and traces of her mother's former life. As a result, Sophie's alienation is acute because she is in a foreign city where "no one looks like her", "dresses like her, and " no one speaks her languages" (Shah, 2023, p. 35), making her both invisible and hyper visible at the same time. The questions that swirled around in her mind- "She stayed here? For how long? Why did she leave?" (Shah, 2023, p. 68) are emotional knots she must unravel to understand her own fractured identity. Walking the same streets as Nita is a process of weaving, where Sophie rewrites the map, entangling her mother's past with her present to form a hybrid self.

Unlike Nita's aesthetic weaving, Sophie's weaving involves tracing her mother's life by navigating symbolic sites, such as Le Canard Volant, apartment in Marais, Bistro Laurent, and Simon's home in America. Each site holds a thread that Sophie pulls to reconstruct a lineage veiled in silence. Her process mirrors Plant's (1997) hypertextual model, where identity emerges through "the partial overlapping of many threads of connectedness" (p. 11) since Sophie's weaving is nonlinear and grounded in emotional inquiry, where she is not rescuing her mother from erasure but reclaiming meaning through affective labor.

Consequently, Sophie's journey becomes a site of postcolonial feminist healing. She does not seek restitution but an understanding of maternal pain, her confusion and desires, and the complex histories that tend to bind and separate them at the same time. Learning that Nita "could have been there for those milestones but opted not to be a part of them" (Shah, 2013, p. 139), propels her to ask questions about how one survives such loss. Sophie's attempt to know Nita is an act of recognition that, despite Nita's choices, she is not reduced to the trope of abandonment as a mother. In this light, Sophie enacts Mohanty's call for resisting the flattening of women from the Global South into monolithic victims and instead honors the messy and contradictory aspects of complex histories.

Unlike Nita, whose strategic silence in Paris functioned as an act of maternal erasure and partial identity, Sophie's silence also evolves strategically. Initially, she mirrors Nita's strategic withholding by concealing her maternal feelings to Cecile and others as a mode of protection in an unfamiliar terrain. But unlike Nita's maternal erasure, Sophie's silences are temporary spaces for gathering insight and building connections. Her emotional restraint allows her to navigate displacement and financial precarity while remaining focused on her search. Over time, these silences paved the way for dialogue as she builds familiarity and community with Cecile, Manoj, Naresh Uncle, and Dao. Eventually, Sophie gains the courage to speak, first to Dao, then to her fiancé, Kiran, and transforms silence into testimony. Her unfolding narrative resists linear progression and instead stitches a diasporic quilt from fragmented truths. Each emotional interaction and relationship in Paris- refuge at Taj Palace. Bonding with Cecile and a cathartic encounter with Dao serve as a node in Sophie's emotional cartography. Through these interactions, she reclaims intimacy in the face of loss and turns absence into presence. Her journey also echoes Spivak's assertion of women's silences being plotted by themselves and embodies Mohanty's intersectional feminist solidarity.

Both Nita and Sophie plot their silences on their terms, even in alienating geographies. While Spivak critiques how women's silences are often misread as voicelessness, Shah's narrative offers a counternarrative – silence here emerges as a deliberate and political act of reclamation rather than absence. Despite the temporal and spatial distance, what binds Nita and Sophie is their shared engagement in their acts of weaving. Nita's narrative is threaded in her aesthetic production and voluntary dislocation, while for Sophie, the rethreading occurs through transnational pursuit, emotional labor, and memory. Though their threads diverge across timelines and geography, their narratives converge in a diasporic tapestry of brown womanhood marked by silence, survival, and resistance. This is because Shah, as a diasporic writer herself, resists collapsing their stories into singular and reductive tropes of abandonment and reconciliation. Instead, she presents an evolving, decentralized form of feminist survivability that echoes Sadie Plant's vision of non-hierarchical, networked meaning-making.

In distinct and interrelated ways, both women challenge the ideological and cultural frameworks that attempt to contain them. Nita resists through absence - by leaving India, embracing solitude, and turning to art. In contrast, Sophie resists through remembrance by pursuing her mother's story and reassembling identity from fragments. Their resistance is heterogeneous, situated not only in their divergent choices but in how they navigate the intersecting structures of gender, race, and displacement. Mohanty cautions against the "process of homogenization and

systemization of the oppression of women in the third world” where the “power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourses” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335) that imposes universal narratives of brown women. Saha’s novel exemplifies this ethos by offering a nuanced portrait of brown diasporic womanhood and silence that is as political as it is personal.

Conclusion

Thus, in *The Direction of the Wind*, Mansi Shah crafts a poignant narrative that centers on the silences, complexities, and resistances of brown diasporic womanhood and defies simplistic categorization. Through the interwoven stories of Nita and Sophie, the novel articulates a feminist vision rooted in resilience, emotional survivability, and heterogeneous agency. Drawing on the conceptual metaphor of Plant’s ‘weaving’, the characters’ journeys illustrate how diasporic brown women rethread their fractured identities into subjectivities that are neither whole nor linear but deeply lived. The novel resonates with Spivak’s critique of the politics of silence and Mohanty’s call for contextual specificity, reminding us that brown women’s lives cannot be flattened into a singular trajectory of expression or liberation. Instead, their lives unfold through layered acts of resistance where some are visible, while others are quiet defiance. Together, they are deeply political acts. In weaving their narratives, Nita and Sophie redefine the contours of diasporic feminist thought, resist erasure, and reclaim emotional agency. Thus, weaving emerges not only as a metaphor but also as a methodology, emphasizing an embodied feminist way of living, resisting, and narrating that honors the multiplicity, intergenerational difference, and the enduring political power of silence.

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