DEMYSTIFYING HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG THROUGH POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST LENSES

Darcy Lynne Ark

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Committee:
Khani Begum, Advisor
Radhika Gajjala
ABSTRACT

Khani Begum, Advisor

This thesis, which used both postcolonial and feminist frameworks, detailed the value of a widely-popularized text like Andre Dubus III’s *House of Sand and Fog* in academic discourse. Employing mainly the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the thesis explained how Dubus’ work exposes issues of internal colonization in America for both immigrants like the Iranian Behrani family in *House of Sand and Fog* and white, less recently immigrated citizens. In addition, it acknowledged the value of distinguishing between First and Third World feminisms when working with a text like *House of Sand and Fog*, and it illustrated such a distinction in the exploration of the two main female characters in Dubus’ novel. Through exploring issues of language, identity, class, race, sex, economic opportunity, and physical space, it argued for an opening of Dubus’ text that acknowledges the suppression of voice endured – in separate and distinct ways – by both immigrant and female voices in America. Ultimately, this thesis encouraged a reconsideration of a somewhat overlooked text, as far as academic discourse is concerned, and a rejuvenation of interest in Dubus’ novel.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

Associated Literature ....................................................................................................... 5

Methodology .................................................................................................................... 7

Brief Novel Summary ....................................................................................................... 10

CHAPTER I. REVIEW OF THEORETICAL TEXTS .......................................................... 12

Locating Disclaimers ........................................................................................................ 12

Imperialism in the United States ...................................................................................... 14

Issues of Authorship ......................................................................................................... 16

Issues of Postcolonality ..................................................................................................... 18

Issues of Feminism ............................................................................................................ 21

Other Theoretical Texts Employed Throughout ............................................................. 25

CHAPTER II. POSTCOLONIAL IMPLICATIONS ......................................................... 28

Colonization of Minority Cultures within Dominant Culture ......................................... 29

Colonization of Dominant Culture within Dominant Culture ......................................... 38

CHAPTER III. FEMINIST IMPLICATIONS ...................................................................... 48

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS ................................. 60

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 62
INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theory strives to acknowledge traditionally suppressed voices in literature; the privileging of imperialistic Western thought and perspective in writing smothers “colonized” voices, and postcolonial theory creates an opportunity of liberation for these voices. In his novel *House of Sand and Fog* (1999), Andre Dubus III liberates the voice of an Iranian family, but he also portrays a society that calls for the liberation of American voices as well, attempting to expand the limits of postcolonial theory. In *House of Sand and Fog*, Dubus proves the possibility of creating a text by the late nineties that is emotional yet calculated and grounded, passionate yet controlled, despite the fact that theorists like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said have, in the past, doubted the possibility of such a text (Leitch 1588, 1997). Dubus illustrates the treatment and suppression of the Behranis, a family forced to flee from Iran to America, and also draws readers’ attention to the suppression of Americans – particularly females – by drawing parallels between Iran and the United States, resulting in a text that furthers postcolonial theory.

This study will provide readings of *House of Sand and Fog* through both postcolonial and feminist lenses. In “From Work to Text,” Roland Barthes explains why reading a text in myriad ways is a necessity: “. . . Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination” (1472). Therefore, *House of Sand and Fog* should not be limited to one textual interpretation or reading, as doing so would erase the plurality of the text and suggest that only one truth or message exists in the text. Barthes also warns, “The Text is not to be thought of as an object that can be computed” (“From Work to Text” 1471). My readings of *House of Sand and Fog* are not meant
to present an ultimate revelation of the text’s meaning; rather, I am simply trying to negotiate the
text in a way that will open it and make multiple readings possible – and useful – in their
postcolonial and feminist implications.

At this point in time, *House of Sand and Fog* is rarely discussed in academic discourse,
and most of the work that does exist deals with the movie rather than the novel. Dubus’ novel,
published in 1999 and selling to over two million readers within the first three years of
publication (Zeitchik) has been heralded as “an enthralling tragedy” by *Kirkus Reviews*, “[a]
mesmerizing tale of the American Dream gone terribly awry” by *Publishers Weekly*, and
“[e]legant and powerful” by *The Washington Post Book World*, yet startlingly little has been
critically written about the work (“House of Sand and Fog”). Why, then, has the text been
overlooked in the academic community? Perhaps the widespread popularity of the novel, along
with the cinematic transformation of the work, has discouraged academics from critically
approaching the novel, but Dubus’ struggle to represent two voices to which he can never fully
relate – the female voice and the immigrant voice – should not be dismissed so lightly. Although
Dubus’ work is understandably limited in its depiction of minority experience in America, there
is certainly value in his attempt as a white male author to create a work that communicates the
impossibility of a dominant culture’s integration of colonized minorities in contemporary
American society, and this value will be uncovered as this project unfolds.

While the commoditization of Dubus’ work can somewhat account for the novel’s
underexposure in academia, it cannot be entirely blamed for the oversight. With increased
attention to American Cultural Studies and Pop Culture within academia, one could deduce that
Dubus’ work would gain some exposure. Especially considering the recent attention to issues in
the Middle East, it seems a notable oversight that the novel has not been more critically
acclaimed. It may also be, for some scholars, the fact that Dubus is not Iranian that complicated the book’s integrity at first glance, and perhaps Dubus’ position as a white male is also to blame for the book’s success in popular culture rather than in academia. When asked in an interview whether or not his characters were based on people he knows, Dubus explained his familiarity with Iranian culture:

. . . I was very good friends with an Iranian when I was in college. Her father was a colonel in the Air Force under the Shah, so I got a good idea of what it was like under that regime. I witnessed his inability to find work when he came to this country. So it grew out of personal experience, personal contact with someone in that situation. Then I had another friend at another college who was Iranian and I pretty much immersed myself in the culture, eating the food, listening to the music. I was almost fluent in Farsi for a while. This was almost 20 years ago. (Keuffer)

In another interview, when asked if he knew much about Iran prior to his long-term relationship with an Iranian woman during the time of the Iranian revolution, Dubus responded: “Not until I met her. I hadn't heard of Iran. Like most teenage Americans, I was ignorant of all geography. She said she was from Persia. She explained it all to me. We were in a relationship for three or four years” (Birnbaum). Clearly, Dubus’ study of Iranian culture is informal and limited, yet he did work closely with Iranian consultants as he wrote House of Sand and Fog: “My friends Kourosh Zomorodian and Ali Farahsate taught me almost all of what I know. Ali gave me a lot of the authentic words for Persian instruments and poetry” (Keuffer). However, reviewers have criticized Dubus’ use of Farsi in the novel, and Dubus concedes to this criticism and insists that he will attempt to correct this shortcoming in the paperback version of the novel (Birnbaum). Despite these faults, though, Dubus’ attempt to present an authentic Iranian voice in the novel
should not be entirely discounted. Similarly, Dubus’ representation of the female voice, mainly through the characters of Nadereh (Nadi) Behrani and Kathy Nicolo, cannot be termed wholly inadequate simply because of Dubus’ male perspective. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes reminds us of the importance of separating author from text: “For [Mallarmé], for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality... , to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (1467). Even though it might seem surprising to choose a text written by a white male author for a study that focuses on postcolonial and feminist readings, my focus is on the text and its implications, not on the author’s intended message, if the author did intend a particular message. Barthes further clarifies this in “The Death of the Author”: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (1468). In addition to “a variety of writings,” this multi-dimensionality allows for a variety of readings, too.

There are other limitations to consider in this project as well. In using *House of Sand and Fog* as an example of a text written by a white male that does succeed in representing – to some extent – Othered voices, I am certainly not suggesting that all white male authors can do what Dubus has done. I am also not arguing that Dubus’ depiction of the silencing of both the female voice and the Iranian voice that this oppression occurs to all females and/or Iranians in America or in other cultures. My main concern for this project is the silencing of the Iranian voice as well as the female voice, and the project is limited to these two distinct modes of oppression because Dubus’ novel details the experiences of an Iranian family in America. I am particularly interested in how Iranian immigrants find a voice in America, as the current tumultuous events in the Middle East continue to escalate. Comparisons can be made between Iranians in America...
and other minority groups in America as well, but that is not within the scope of this particular study.

Additionally, one other apparent problem arose with my decision to approach this text as a critical work: I am a white female interpreting a white male’s interpretation of both women’s and Iranian’s colonization within American culture. I claim what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “sanctioned ignorance” (*A Critique* 279) in my approach to *House of Sand and Fog*, but the fact remains that my exposure to Iranian culture is limited. While my female perspective will assist in my critique of Dubus’ treatment of the colonization of females in his work, I cannot write with an authentic Iranian voice. I can only hope that my “sanctioned ignorance” will allow me some authority in this project without my seeming to ignore my relationship to the text. My argument is that as long as my work acknowledges its own weaknesses, the strengths can be appreciated without too much tangential criticism.

Associated Literature

In the MLA Bibliography database, only three articles are listed as related to Andre Dubus III’s *House of Sand and Fog*. The first article listed, Michael Hardin’s “Andre Dubus III’s White Whale: *Moby Dick* and *House of Sand and Fog*,” is a two-page analysis of the links between Dubus’ work and *Moby Dick*. The remaining articles, Houshang Golmakani’s “A Human Drama, Not an Ethnographic Documentary: An Interview with Vadim Perelman, the Director of *House of Sand and Fog*” and Terri Spaugh’s “House of Sand and Fog,” briefly address the movie based on Dubus’ novel, which distinctly departs from the literary work. As of now, there are no available critical analyses of Dubus’ novel, and this is an oversight that should be remedied. The shortage of academic discourse surrounding a text that confronts postcolonial
issues and feminist issues, among others, is surprising, and this project is an attempt to ignite discourse about the novel in the academic community.

Before critically approaching the novel, I first grounded myself in both postcolonial theory and feminist theory. Using Spivak’s work in the postcolonial field as a starting point, I was able to understand why choosing a novel like *House of Sand and Fog* for my project was a valid academic study despite the lack of prior academic discourse about the work. Spivak’s insistence “that to ignore or invade the subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project” (*A Critique* 290) gives credence to Dubus’ novel and to my own work in this study. Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* also inspired a separate section on the colonization of women depicted in Dubus’ novel; she writes, “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (304). Not only does this border-space apply to third-world women, but also to women within a colonizing country like America. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty elucidates this idea of the colonization of women in colonizing as well as colonized countries: “My intellectual preoccupations in the 1980s focused on the way the ‘West’ colonizes gender, in particular, its colored, racial, and class dimensions” (1). Since then, Mohanty’s focus has shifted to a concern “with the way that gender matters in the racial, class, and national formations of globalization” (1), and she proposes that “decolonizing feminism involves a careful critique of the ethics and politics of Eurocentrism, and a corresponding analysis of the difficulties and joys of crossing cultural, national, racial, and class boundaries in the search for feminist communities anchored in justice and equality” (II).
Both Spivak and Mohanty support the notion that females are in a sense colonized, and this connection between women and other colonized groups provides a crucial link for the impact of my study.

In addition to reading theoretical texts, I was able to read several texts dealing specifically with Iranian culture, as an understanding of Iranian immigrants in particular is crucial for my work with Dubus’ novel. Within the time constraints of this project, I was able to read Ari Siletz’s *The Mullah with No Legs and Other Stories*, a collection of stories written by an Iranian, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, a graphic novel detailing Satrapi’s experiences in Iran during the war between Iran and Iraq, and Anne Tyler’s *Digging to America*, a novel written about two families – one Iranian and one white American – who both decide to adopt Korean girls. Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* and Mahnaz Kousha’s *Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women* have also been integral in developing my understanding of Iranian culture, and the interviews with Spivak in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue* have aided in developing my knowledge of marginalized voices.

Methodology

A few years ago, I read Dubus’ *House of Sand and Fog* and was particularly affected by the work. The novel overtly communicates the silencing of both females and other minority groups in a dominating American society, and a claim this drastic coming from a white male author in the form of a best-selling novel accessible to readers outside academia seemed to warrant further attention. I chose this novel in particular also because it is the only text I have located that focuses on an Iranian family living in America and also on a white female living in
America. The main Iranian character and the main white female character take turns narrating in
the novel, and this characteristic is one I have yet to find in another novel. Viewing the film
adaptation of *House of Sand and Fog* (Perelman 2003) only further complicated my reception of
the work, as the film communicates a slightly different message to its audience; the silence
presented in Dubus’ novel is not as pervasive a theme in the cinematic representation. After
deciding that working with the novel was important to me, I began searching for other works
dealing with Iranian families living in America, and these works were difficult to locate. My
initial goal was to search for a work written by an Iranian about Iranians living in America and
use that text to develop my analysis of Dubus’ work, but finding such a work proved nearly
impossible. Siletz’s *The Mullah with No Legs and Other Stories* begins with stories about an
Iranian family living in Iran, but later stories in the work begin to approach the topic of how
difficult living as an Iranian in America can prove. However, the mentions of living in America
were fairly limited. Also, the more I re-read *House of Sand and Fog*, the more I realized that
devoting my entire project to this one work would be the most revelatory. I began to divide my
study of Dubus’ novel into feminist applications and postcolonial applications, and this decision
elucidated the need to devote the entire project to *House of Sand and Fog*.

With that said, though, my knowledge of Iranian culture was particularly limited as I
began my work with Dubus’ novel, and I found it crucial to read as many texts as possible that
could develop my knowledge. I began with *Digging to America*, and though this novel clarified
some questions I had about Iranian traditions, especially those concerning annual celebrations
and food, the author is a white female. Therefore, I continued to search for texts written by
Iranians to increase my comprehension of Iranian tradition, religion, and practices. Siletz’s *The
Mullah with No Legs and Other Stories* proved extraordinarily revelatory for me, as this was the
first work I read about Iranians written by an Iranian. Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Kousha’s *Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women*, and Satrapi’s *Persepolis* were all integral in forming my perception of the treatment of women in Iran, and re-reading *House of Sand and Fog* after familiarizing myself with these works was enlightening. After exploring works by Iranian authors, it became clear that reading *The Koran* was also crucial for me as I proceeded with my work. Without a firm understanding of what Muslims value and believe, my reading of Dubus’ work would be perceivably lacking.

After reading as widely as time would allow, I began to determine exactly how to divide my project into chapters. Even after my first reading of *House of Sand and Fog*, though, I knew I wanted to devote a section to the silencing of the Iranian voice in America and another to the silencing of the female voice in America. Both voices are, in a sense, colonized by the dominant culture, and though the colonization of both voices occurs in some similar fashions, the separation of the two is crucial. By combining females and Iranians, I would be implying that all oppressed peoples are the same, and this implication would undermine my credibility and my entire project. Similarly, I am working specifically with Iranian immigrants in this project because the family in Dubus’ novel is Iranian, not because I am arguing that one type of suppressed voice is illustrative of all suppressed voices. Therefore, separating my analysis of the silencing of the female voice and the Iranian voice is essential.

This project will begin with a brief explanation of the theoretical texts used and how those texts elucidate the value of Dubus’ work as a politically-charged piece rather than solely a popular culture commodity. Following the theoretical framework, this study will be divided into two main sections: the colonization of immigrant Iranians within America and the colonization of females – both Third World females and others – within America. The study will then end
with an explanation of what acknowledging Dubus’ work as one worthy of academic attention means for postcolonial theory as well as feminism.

Brief Novel Summary

Before more explicitly detailing these issues, though, a brief summary of the novel will be beneficial for those readers unfamiliar with Dubus’ work. *House of Sand and Fog* opens with the Behranis, a recently exiled Iranian family, living in a wealthy apartment complex despite Colonel Behrani’s being forced to work as both a gas station attendant and highway clean-up man. The Behrani family consists of the Colonel, his wife Nadi, and their teenage son Esmail. Behrani buys a house at an auction for a reasonably low cost, and when he discovers the house’s value if he were to fix it up and sell it privately, he envisions a more successful future for himself and his family. Because the apartment costs so much and Behrani makes so little at his two jobs, the family’s savings are quickly disappearing, and selling this house seems to be his only option for a chance at success in America. The Behranis legally purchase the house and move in, planning to stay a short while, build a widow’s walk, and sell the house for a large profit.

The other perspective in the story comes from newly-divorced former addict Kathy Nicolo, who, along with her brother, inherited the house from her father. Because the county falsely charges Kathy with a business tax on her residence due to an error in the address listed as a home/business, Kathy loses the house and cannot make a case with the county before Behrani purchases the house at auction. Kathy is forced to live in a motel, then in her car, as her lawyer attempts to get the county to rescind the sale of her house. Deputy Sheriff Lester Burdon, one of the men who evicts Kathy from her house, immediately sympathizes with Kathy’s situation and the two enter a passionate and impulsive relationship that results in the disintegration of
Burdon’s marriage. The two then live at a friend’s fishing camp cabin and constantly plot to regain legal ownership of the house.

By the end of the novel, Burdon forces the Colonel to sign the house back over to the county, but in the process of the transaction, the Colonel’s son Esmail is shot and killed, the Colonel smothers his wife to spare her the grief of their son’s death, and the Colonel commits suicide after signing over the house to his newly-married daughter Soraya. Burdon and Kathy both end up in jail, accused of false imprisonment, kidnapping, and brandishing a weapon, and they lose all contact with each other. The characters all lose voice – literally and/or figuratively – by the novel’s end, illustrating the impossibility of sustaining voice in an aggressive dominant culture.

As my project concludes, I hope to validate Dubus’ work as one that succeeds in communicating the shortcomings of America’s attempt to validate all voices present in society, including both Western voices and Third World immigrant voices. For some reason, this novel has gone virtually unrecognized in academia, and this study is an attempt to read the text in a way that makes its valuable postcolonial and feminist implications clear. Many readers find Dubus’ work limiting in that it leaves all integral characters silent by the end; one reader, in an online review, writes: “No one's soul became whole. No one moved in consciousness. There was one self-pitying implosion after another, all to the detriment of someone else. Of all the myriad things literature can bring to us to move us forward, utter stasis is what this one brings. Completely infuriating” (peachesembarcadero). This final silence, though, is not a comfortable one; rather it is a call for political action and social awareness that should not be overlooked because of the novel’s popularity or the author’s limitations.
CHAPTER I. REVIEW OF THEORETICAL TEXTS

Before entering a discussion of House of Sand and Fog, it is crucial that the theoretical texts used to generate my framework for analysis are reviewed. The texts most integral in the formation of my framework are Spivak’s A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present and The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, Mohanty’s Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter’s Feminist Epistemologies, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, and Edward Said’s Orientalism. These works provide the perfect framework with which to explicate House of Sand and Fog, generating concrete approaches to issues of imperialism on U.S. soil, authorship, postcolonality, and feminism, among other areas.

Locating Disclaimers

Spivak’s work is particularly useful in creating an avenue for analysis; her work contains numerous academic disclaimers, all employed as a way to approach texts while acknowledging one’s own weaknesses and areas of limited understanding. In beginning to work with House of Sand and Fog, I found myself uncomfortable with the idea of using my voice to represent other marginalized voices. Spivak helps lessen this discomfort, though, as she creates a legitimate opening for my analysis: “What can the intellectual do toward the texts of the oppressed? Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one’s own positionality for other communities in power” (Post-Colonial Critic 56). Following Spivak’s advice, I have attempted to acknowledge my own limitations in the scope of this project, representing other voices to the best of my ability.
and never claiming to speak for them. Spivak also provides a starting point for my analysis; my reading of House of Sand and Fog certainly does not cover all interpretations, nor does it end conclusively and without opportunities for criticism. However, according to Spivak, presenting my argument is nonetheless crucial to starting a more academic dialogue about Dubus’ text:

If we want to start something, we must ignore that our starting point is, all efforts taken, shaky. If we want to get something done, we must ignore that, all provisions made, the end will be inconclusive. This ignoring is not an active forgetfulness, it is, rather, an active marginalizing of the marshiness, the swampiness, the lack of firm grounding in the margins, at beginning and end. (A Critique 175)

In actively “marginalizing” the “swampiness” of this project, I am making a conscious choice to spend less time arguing for the validation of my own academic voice and more time creating a lucid analysis of the text that will, hopefully, generate an academic response about the text itself rather than one solely criticizing my own positionality.

In addition, Spivak’s approach to literary criticism in general elevates this project from the projects of my academic past. Previously, I was preoccupied with convincing my readers of the authenticity or value of a given text, and although that approach may sometimes prove worthwhile, it limits further dialogue about a literary work. Establishing authenticity does not yield comprehensive implications of a text; it simply presents the text as a valid voice. For House of Sand and Fog, though, one of the criticisms of the text is that the white male author cannot present authentic marginalized voices, so my analysis would stop at that point. In searching for something besides authenticity, I can continue working with Dubus’ novel and attempt to expose the implications of the work, not limited because of Dubus’ positionality, but more complex because of it. “I’m more interested,” Spivak writes, “in opening up texts than in
establishing, like some medieval scholar, the authenticity of a text” (Post-Colonial Critic 55); opening up House of Sand and Fog proves a more valuable strategy than establishing authenticity.

Spivak’s work also helped me solidify my aims for this particular project. She writes, “We cannot ‘learn about’ the subaltern only by reading literary texts, or, mutatis mutandis, sociohistorical documents. . . . It is responsible to read books, but book learning is not responsibility” (142). Before starting this analysis of House of Sand and Fog, I knew that it would be impossible to understand the Othered voices in the text; this is not my goal. Rather, I am attempting to open the text to different readings and to clarify why and how this text can be legitimately placed in an academic arena. House of Sand and Fog should be placed in a space that allows the text to introduce issues of marginalization to a general mass readership as well as to the academic community.

Imperialism in the United States

My initial understanding of postcolonial studies did not include the notion of “internal colonization” that Spivak introduces in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (172). Instead, I applied postcolonialism only to those colonized on their own land by imperialist powers like the United States or Britain. After reading Dubus’ work, though, it became clear that not only does the United States colonize the foreign Other on its own land, but also colonizes dominant Americans who have been marginalized, like females. In A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Spivak proposes, “Let us learn to distinguish between ‘internal colonization’ – the patterns of exploitation and domination of disenfranchised groups within a metropolitan country like the United States or Britain – and the colonization of other spaces, of which Robinson Crusoe’s
island is a ‘pure’ example” (172). In Spivak’s acknowledgement of “internal colonization,” my exploration of *House of Sand and Fog* as a text to which postcolonial theory could be applied became more valid and academically sound. Spivak advocates a separation of internal colonization and other types of colonization, allowing an opening of a discourse that usually confines itself to “the colonization of other spaces.”

Another problem that arose with my perception of *House of Sand and Fog* as a postcolonial text was that Iran was never literally colonized by the United States in a territorial sense. The actions of the United States government certainly contributed to much of the turmoil in Iran, as the United States’ interest in Iran’s oil incited CIA involvement to “consolidate power under the Shah” (“People & Events”), but physical colonization has never taken place. This, then, seemed to pose a problem for my use of postcolonial analysis on a text that focuses on an Iranian family living in the United States. However, Spivak does distinguish between territorial colonization and other types of less physical colonization:

> Since the ‘national origins’ of new immigrants, as fantasized by themselves, have not, so far, contributed to the unacknowledged and remoter historical culture of the United States, what we are demanding is that the United States recognize our rainbow as part of its history of the present. Since most of our countries were not territorially colonized by the United States, this is a transaction that relates to our status as New Americans, not primarily to the countries of our origin. (*A Critique* 395)

Spivak calls for this distinction by using italics for the word “territorially,” suggesting that colonization can occur without territorial imperialism, increasing the number of cultures that can be viewed as postcolonial. Iranian resistance to the United States’ interest in the Shah led to the hostility exemplified in the Iranian hostage situation at the U.S. Embassy in Iran, implying that
although United States involvement with Iran was not of the acquiring territory type, it nonetheless threatened and altered the lives of Iranians. In addition, *House of Sand and Fog* attempts to acknowledge the “rainbow” of experience in the United States that Spivak mentions, providing further proof that Dubus’ work deserves more academic consideration than it has received in the past.

Issues of Authorship

In approaching a postcolonial text, Spivak argues that one must unlearn “one’s privilege” (*Post-Colonial Critic* 42). Spivak further elucidates this concept of unlearning privilege as she writes, “So that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency” (42). Spivak’s explanation of unlearning privilege markedly influenced how I approached Dubus’ text as a reader. Rather than viewing myself as the white center evaluating a presentation of the Iranian margin, I tried to locate myself as simply a reader receiving a presentation of the Iranian center; in doing so, I focused on “recogniz[ing] . . . the position of the speaking subject” rather that solely reading the subject (Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic* 42).

Spivak also contributes to my setting the parameters of this project; it was crucial that I not commit myself to an area of analysis too distant from the literary work, as doing so would compromise the legitimacy of my own work. Spivak offers a warning that encourages setting limits for the analysis of any text: “When we operate with the opposition book-author, we want to avoid the kind of simple reversal whereby the critic’s hands remain clean and the critic becomes diagnostic in a simple symptomatic reading. We keep ourselves within the book’s field and see how far we can go when we respect that” (*Post-Colonial Critic* 51). Instead of focusing
on a discussion of what Dubus could have added to his novel to improve it or expand its postcolonial or feminist implications, my project centers on a reading of the text that stays within and respects “the book’s field.” Expanding the focus would result in a reading of the text that focuses more on what is not present in the author’s work than on what is present, and this becomes problematic and not entirely useful for evaluating what the literary work adds to an academic dialogue.

Next, Spivak addresses the issue of postcolonial and feminist readings of a white male’s text. This might not be an issue for many readers, but for some, Dubus’ novel might be a surprising focus for such readings. Spivak explains the dangers of assuming texts are somehow limited in postcolonial and feminist implications simply because of an author’s position as a white male:

. . . the sort of breast-beating which stops the possibility of social change is to say, ‘I’m only a white male, I cannot speak as a feminist,’ or ‘I’m only a white male and cannot speak for the blacks.’ You know that whole thing about ‘Oh, there was no voice of the other because there were no black anthropologists here,’ et cetera. What we are asking for is that the hegemonic discourses, the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other rather than simply say, ‘O.K., sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the blacks.’ That’s the kind of breast-beating that is left behind at the threshold and then business goes on as usual. (Post-Colonial Critic 121)

Spivak explains how excluding white male voices is counterproductive to the proliferation of Othered voices, especially considering that marginalized voices are often unheard when they speak for themselves, as long as including white male voices comes with the acknowledgement
that the representation of marginalized voices cannot be accepted as if the representations were the voices themselves. Sandra Harding’s “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” published in Alcoff and Potter’s *Feminist Epistemologies*, reaffirms the importance of male representations of female perspectives:

It is not just the women in those other movements who must know the world from the perspective of women’s lives. Everyone must do so if the movements are to succeed at their own goals. Most importantly, this requires that women be active directors of the agendas of these movements. But it also requires that men in those movements be able to generate original feminist knowledge from the perspective of women’s lives as, for example, John Stuart Mill, Marx and Engels, Frederick Douglass, and later male feminists have done. (67)

Both Spivak and Harding acknowledge the value of male-authored feminist texts in the proliferation of feminism, and my feminist reading of *House of Sand and Fog* will do so as well.

**Issues of Postcolonality**

Because Dubus’ work focuses on an Iranian family living in America, the ways in which postcolonial theory can be incorporated are at first somewhat muddled. *House of Sand and Fog* cannot be easily categorized as postcolonial because Iran has never been territorially colonized by the United States, yet a postcolonial framework is crucial for approaching the text for several reasons. However, the more traditional uses of postcolonial theory will have to be expanded and revised somewhat to more fully serve the purpose of this particular project.

To begin, the issue of marginality should be broken down to explain exactly how Dubus can be viewed as a postcolonial writer. In *The Post-Colonial Critic*, Spivak asserts, “In a certain
sense, I think there is nothing that is central. The centre is always constituted in terms of its own marginality” (40). This assertion more firmly grounds the notion that Dubus can be viewed as a postcolonial writer, as he focuses on a postcolonial subject and relocates himself in the margins.

Also, building on what Spivak claims about relative centers, an author can also de-center the white characters in his/her novel as well as de-centering him/herself. By providing non-white characters with the chance to speak from their own center rather than from the margins of whiteness, an author could create a doubly de-centered text. The value of a postcolonial lens here comes in the form of a negotiable center that more closely represents the experience of an immigrant family. Thus, *House of Sand and Fog* can be viewed as postcolonial in the sense that it questions the formation of margins to a stable, non-negotiable center, providing some opportunity for voices of traditionally marginalized groups in the United States to speak and be heard. Dubus moves his perspective to the margin as he writes this text, and he also brings the Iranian marginal relationship to whiteness to the center of his fiction, placing the readers of *House of Sand and Fog* in the margins of a non-white center.

*House of Sand and Fog* also brings to the forefront the notion that colonization can take place within an imperialist country, both to perceived members of that country and perceived Others of that country, once again expanding the scope of what can be considered postcolonial. If an imperialist society can be viewed as colonizing those coming from outside the country, it can certainly be viewed as colonizing those already within the country as well. It is crucial at this point, though, to acknowledge that I am by no means suggesting that the internal assimilation of members of imperialist societies is entirely comparable to the “internal colonization” (Spivak, *A Critique* 172) of the Other within that society. However, similarities can be drawn. In most cases, those marginalized voices of the dominant culture have a stronger
chance of meeting the demands of society because their markers of difference are often less apparent to other members of society (markers such as skin color, primary language, religion, etc.); however, both dominant Americans who have been marginalized, such as white females, and Others are forced to assimilate to a certain extent. Therefore, acknowledging the difficulties Americans encounter as they attempt to meet societal demands should not be viewed as entirely unrelated to postcolonialism; oftentimes, dominant Americans who have been marginalized simply function under the illusion of freedom, whereas immigrant members of American society are often denied such an illusion. The inclusion of such types of colonization in this project serves to further detail the imperialist nature of the American government.

Another more apparent way Dubus’ novel can be placed within the realm of postcolonial discourse is the fact that it resists the perpetuation of European as a human norm. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak notes that many texts “take for granted that the ‘European’ is the human norm and offer us descriptions and/or prescriptions” (6). Here, Spivak highlights the importance of questioning the norm to which colonized cultures are often compared. Dubus’ novel perpetuates no such norm; instead it questions a society that functions under such a norm. By showing readers how maintaining a European ideal can destroy the lives of those not included within this ideal, Dubus illustrates the danger of privileging one section of society over another. The idea of rejecting and/or expanding the European ideal may at first appear a relatively simple one; however, this idea is often “take[n] for granted” (Spivak, *A Critique* 6). *House of Sand and Fog* clearly offers a critique of such an ideal, yet the novel is rarely written about critically; therefore, this simple idea does seem to warrant further investigation. Similarly, Dubus’ novel details the destruction of cultural identity that occurs when an imperialist country colonizes those Others within. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon
insists, “Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of the conquered people” (1587), and the same result is true of domination occurring within the dominant country’s homeland. Fanon later continues this idea; he writes: “A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in a systematic fashion. It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy” (1588). This stripping of cultural identity is evident in Dubus’ novel, and using a postcolonial lens to detect instances of this collapse of cultural identity proves useful.

Noting the hybridization that occurs as a result of internal colonization will be a more useful approach to this project than attempting to detect an entirely separate culture functioning within American society. In The Post-Colonial Critic, Spivak observes, “. . . there is now a longing once again for the pure Other of the West” (8), and my project will attempt to resist this longing. Spivak further warns, “One needs to be vigilant against simple notions of identity which overlap neatly with language or location” (38); acknowledging Spivak’s note of caution by valuing and recognizing hybridization will allow my approach to House of Sand and Fog to move beyond such a simplification of identity.

Issues of Feminism

Including a feminist framework in this project was not my initial intention, but as the project moved forward, it became apparent that not creating such a framework would deeply undermine my aims. In A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Spivak writes, “If much of what I write here seems to apply as much to the general operations of imperialist disciplinary practice as to feminism, it is because I wish to point at the dangers of not acknowledging the connections between the two” (147), and I intend to explore the connection between the two throughout this
project. In their introduction to *Feminist Epistemologies*, Alcoff and Potter explain that “[i]f feminism is to liberate women, it must address virtually all forms of domination because women fill the ranks of every category of oppressed people” (4), and this further details the connection between postcolonial theory and feminist theory.

I will begin by explaining my choice of feminist texts, as focusing on Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders* might at first seem an unusual choice considering the prevalence of other feminist scholars and theorists in American academia. However, Mohanty’s work more fully suits my project as it confronts the limitations of the First World feminisms that currently dominate academic discourse. Indeed, the term “colonization” has been used “by feminist women of color in the United States to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women’s movements . . .” (Mohanty 18), and using Mohanty’s feminist framework will help me avoid such colonization. Mohanty insists that “it is in the production of this Third World difference that Western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities that characterize the lives of women in these countries” (19), so relying on Western feminist frameworks would be a mistake for a text like *House of Sand and Fog*, considering that one of the two main female characters in the novel is Iranian. Mohanty further details the danger inherent in approaching a text like Dubus’ with a Western feminist framework:

. . . in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression. . . . This results in an assumption of women as an always already constituted group, one that has been labeled powerless, exploited, sexually harassed, and so on, by feminist scientific, economic, legal, and sociological
discourses. . . . This focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as ‘powerless’ in a particular context. (23)

Thus, it will be important for me as a critic to avoid grouping the white female character Kathy Nicolo with Iranian character Nadi when I begin my discussion of the feminist implications of Dubus’ novel.

Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders* argues for a decolonization of feminism in order to more fully reflect the heterogeneity of women in the world, and using this notion of decolonizing feminism as a framework for my analysis allows me to identify the feminist implications of the two main female characters in the novel separately, not completely ignoring either First World or Third World feminisms. The character of Kathy Nicolo is operating under a distinctly separate feminist realm than is Nadi, and applying one feminism to both characters would be ethnocentric on either count. In Western feminism, “Third World Women” are often constructed “as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems” (Mohanty 23), and relying on Mohanty’s feminist framework for my project will expose the dangers of analyzing an Iranian women from a strictly Western feminist framework.

Additionally, Mohanty’s description of decolonizing feminism can easily be used in conjunction with facets of postcolonial theory: “. . .decolonizing feminism involves a careful critique of the ethics and politics of Eurocentrism, and a corresponding analysis of the difficulties and joys of crossing cultural, national, racial, and class boundaries in the search for feminist communities anchored in justice and equality” (11). Mohanty’s ideal feminism calls into question the same European ideal contested in postcolonial theory, and both Mohanty’s
feminist framework and Spivak’s postcolonial framework confront issues of class and race, making the fusion of the two frameworks a logical move.

Like Mohanty, Spivak has contested a reliance on Western feminism; in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz transcribed in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Grosz confronts Spivak, asserting, “You have accused First World academic feminists of a double standard: of ignoring, reducing or explaining away the otherness of other women . . .” (8). The transcription then includes a previous statement of Spivak’s:

> When we speak for ourselves [as academic feminists] we urge with conviction: the personal is political. For the rest of the world’s women, the sense of whose personal micrology is difficult (though not impossible) for us to acquire, we fall back on a colonialist theory of the most efficient information retrieval. We will not be able to speak to women out there if we depend completely on conferences and anthologies by Western-trained informants. (8-9)

In response to Grosz’s question, then, Spivak responds, “My project is the careful project of unlearning our privilege as our loss” (9). In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak continues her critique of Western feminist ideology, writing, “It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism” (114). She later elucidates this notion, writing, “Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. . . . If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow” (274). Using Mohanty’s work as a starting place will ensure this project’s resistance to reproducing the imperialism detailed in Spivak’s work.
As a final note on my feminist reading of *House of Sand and Fog*, I am trying to heed the advice of Alcoff and Potter in their *Feminist Epistemologies*: “. . . to refer to a liberatory project as ‘feminist’ cannot mean that it is only for or about ‘women,’ but that it is informed by or consistent with feminism. It seeks, in current feminist parlance, to unmake the web of oppressions and reweave the web of life” (4). My feminist reading of *House of Sand and Fog* will not be a recounting of the female characters in the novel; rather, it will be an analysis of how the female characters in the novel attempt to escape from their “web of oppressions.”

Other Theoretical Texts Employed Throughout

In addition to concentrating on the works of Spivak and Mohanty, I referenced several other theoretical texts to construct and inform my approach to *House of Sand and Fog*. Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* is mentioned earlier with reference to the work’s presentation of cultures under colonial domination, but it also provides a useful description of literary texts dealing with postcolonial issues. Fanon observes that issues of both class and race contribute to the suppression of marginalized voices, but notes that literature has yet to illustrate this suppression beyond texts that function as outlets for emotion encouraged by the colonizer to avoid more revolutionary action. Fanon also explains how “literature [of colonialism] at first chooses to confine itself to the tragic and poetic style; but later on novels, short stories, and essays are attempted” (1588). He goes on to advise that to “aid such processes” of creating liberating literature “is in a certain sense to avoid their dramatization and to clear the atmosphere” (1589). In applying this advice to *House of Sand and Fog* as a postcolonial text, I found that the fact the novel is written by a white, male author does help “clear the atmosphere” and aid in the resistance to falling into the category of over-dramatic polemic.
Likewise, in *Orientalism*, Said asserts that writers attempting to express marginalized voices either create “coarse polemics” beyond worth or “atomistic” accounts of suppression too specific to inform “the field” (1997), doubting the existence, at that time, of a text that could effectively liberate colonized voices. Realizing that much of literature gravitates toward one pole or the other, I found myself even more appreciative of Dubus’ novel, as it resists falling strictly into one category or the other, resulting in a work that communicates both emotion and detail. Such a text should be able, according to Said, to affect both “the field,” as it can be useful outside of itself because it resists presenting a storyline so specific that it cannot inform any other text or school of thought, and readers in general, as it contains enough emotional appeal to gain attention.

Another particularly useful text for this project was Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as this work details the separation of self and Other on a basic level. In explaining the process through which one becomes self-conscious, Hegel describes a stage at which Other and self “are opposed to one another, one being only recognized, the other only recognizing” (631). This stage in achieving self-consciousness should only last a moment, but for the postcolonial subject, the perpetual state of “being only recognized” without being allowed the authority to engage in “recognizing” lasts much longer than a moment. In this situation, the Other is like a slave to a Western self that uses the Other’s existence only to confirm its own, and clearly, this is the danger of colonization.

Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* also provides the groundwork for recognition of self, but does so with specific attention to language. Affirmation of self through language occurs frequently in *House of Sand and Fog*, and an acknowledgement of the connection between the two emerges clearly in Saussure’s work: “If words stood for pre-existing concepts,
they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true” (970). Therefore, in affirming one’s name, one is, in a sense, affirming a place in the world around him/her. Before giving oneself a name, though, and/or before society recognizes that name, it could be suggested that one cannot rightly be viewed as an integral part of society. In focusing on language, too, Saussure’s work incites the question: what about people who have no voice, both literally and figuratively? This project will, throughout, attempt to address that question.

One final theoretical work that proves helpful to my argument is Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. When writing of the entertainment industry as a type of colonizer itself, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance” (1232). Later, the authors again explain how industry stifles resistance: “Culture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts. Industrial culture adds its contribution” (1235). Acknowledging the role of industry, entertainment and other, in the suppression – indeed, colonization – of American society will be useful later as I explain how Dubus’ novel illustrates the colonization of dominant, yet marginalized, Americans as well as immigrants.
CHAPTER II. POSTCOLONIAL IMPLICATIONS

The most overt liberation of voice in Dubus’ novel emerges in the details surrounding the Behrani family’s situation in America. Colonel Behrani and his family were forced to leave Iran after the Shah lost power in the late 1970s, and even though the United States was perceived by Iranians as supporting the Shah, rather than colonizing Iran by overthrowing the Shah themselves, American hostility toward Iranians increased following the hostage crisis at the American embassy in Iran in 1979 (“Iran Hostage Crisis”). Although imperialist powers did not militarily seize Iran, the fact remains that Iranian voices could not gain privilege in Western literature. Despite the eventual fall of the Behrani family in House of Sand and Fog, Dubus draws attention to issues of class, language, race, and identity in the novel, creating a channel for the liberation of the family’s voice. The Behranis could not survive the suppression of their family in America, but Dubus succeeds in creating a way for their voices to be acknowledged. In the novel’s epigraph, Dubus quotes from “The Balcony” by Octavio Paz: “Beyond myself / somewhere / I wait for my arrival”; House of Sand and Fog expedites this arrival.

In addition to providing a channel for the liberation of Iranian voice, Dubus forces readers to acknowledge that American voices, at times, need liberation as well. The United States government colonizes Americans and suppresses American voices in the same way that other more literally colonized voices, such as the Behrani’s, have been smothered. Postcolonial theory must acknowledge the need to liberate suppressed American voices as well as suppressed non-Western voices, and Dubus’ depiction of Kathy Nicolo illustrates the need for such liberation. Spivak’s perception of “Other” no longer applies solely to non-Europeans or non-Western subjects, but also to Americans when their government treats them as “Other,” disregarding their voices and smothering their development in the same way an Iranian’s voice
and development are punctuated. Kathy’s experiences are not “normative” any more than Colonel Behrani’s experiences; she has no voice in the United States government’s eyes (Spivak, *A Critique* 267). While Behrani’s voice is marginalized mainly because of racism, Kathy exemplifies Fanon’s notion of class as contributory to the marginalization of voice. An Irish bartender once explained America to Kathy: “‘Dat’s what they say of this country back home, Kath: ‘America, the Land of Milk and Honey.’ Bot they never tell you the milk’s gone sour and the honey’s stolen’” (38). Dubus, in liberating the colonized voice, also questions the freedom of the perceived colonizer. By drawing parallels between Iran and the United States, Dubus suggests that the American voice calls for liberation, much as the Iranian voice does in this novel, expanding what the study of postcolonial theory encompasses.

Colonization of Minority Cultures within Dominant Culture

One way Dubus highlights the suppression of the Iranian voice is by comparing the class status of the Behranis before and after they leave Iran. By giving Behrani the opportunity to narrate his own story, readers get a more lucid depiction of the occurrences in the novel, compared to the vision they would get if Kathy Nicolo, the single white woman who first owns the house in dispute, were the sole narrator. In the novel’s beginning, Colonel Behrani, in first person narrative form, describes his job gathering trash on a highway. He works in the heat, constantly sweating, the sun tanning his head and back (15). He silently eats lunch with a crew composed of Chinese, Panamanian, and Vietnamese men, and he studies the classifieds, scanning for opportunity. In Iran, Behrani was a colonel in the Imperial Air Force, but in America he can find no opportunity beyond working on the highway during the day and in a gas station during the night; for Behrani, the fact that he is Iranian determines his economic situation more so than
his class status, as he was considered wealthy in Iran. At one point, Behrani exclaims to his highway supervisor, “I was a colonel, Mr. Torez. I was a colonel in the Imperial Air Force. Do you know this, Mr. Torez? I was a colonel” (16), thus drawing a distinct contrast to his current status as a highway garbage soldier. Fanon articulates this form of suppression, writing, “The Western bourgeoisie has prepared enough fences and railings to have no real fear of the competition of those whom it exploits and holds in contempt . . . . it is racism which minimizes what it hates” (1585). Even though Behrani is qualified, he is rejected for higher-paying jobs:

In my country, I was not only a desk officer; I bought F-16 jets from Israel and the United States, and when I was a captain in Tehran, a genob sarvan, I worked on the engines with my own hands. Of course, all the best aerocompanies are here in California but in four years I have spent hundreds of dollars copying my credentials; I have worn French suits and my Italian shoes to hand-deliver my qualifications; I have waited and then called back after the correct waiting time; but there is nothing. I have had only one interview and that was with a young girl in college who I believe the company was simply giving personnel experience. That was over two years past. (17)

Despite his low-paying jobs, Behrani must “keep up [his family’s] appearance” (19), living in a lavishly furnished apartment, driving an expensive car, and wearing expensive suits; unfortunately, the money he makes working in America cannot support the lifestyle required for him to maintain his pride and dignity. He changes into a suit before going home after working all day on the highway, and his son does not even know what he does for money. In American society, Behrani cannot gain success because his talents as a colonel are not recognized, and he cannot take the time off work to establish himself otherwise by opening a private business. Behrani longs “for the return of the dignity [he] was beginning to believe [he] would never
recover” (48), and working with a road crew and in a gas station cannot replace the dignity he felt while working for the Shah.

When Behrani does discover a way to elevate his status, purchasing Kathy’s house at an auction, he gains some faith that he will eventually be able to make a respectable living in America. Behrani decides to add some value to the property by adding a widow’s walk and then reselling the house for a profit, after which he will “be able to show [Nadi] eighty or ninety thousand dollars . . . and [have] the opportunity to purchase another auction property to sell for profit or even begin a business of some kind right away” (56). However, this faith is destroyed when the county requests that the sale be rescinded. From Behrani’s point of view, though, “what manner of society is it when one cannot expect a business transaction to be completed once the papers have been signed and the money deposited?” (96). In Iran, Behrani owned a house on the Caspian Sea, and in America, he cannot even own a small house with a widow’s walk. Dubus makes it clear that Behrani is caught between his former social status in Iran, which consisted of socializing with high Iranian military officials and even meeting the Shah, and his current social status in America. Allowing Behrani to tell the details from his point of view results in readers sympathizing with a man they would otherwise blame for not returning Kathy’s house. Behrani asserts that he knows “rich opportunity” better than Americans, who have “eyes that never appear satisfied,” and Dubus allows readers to view this observation as hopeful rather than threatening (124). Instead of solely sympathizing with the white female lead character, Dubus makes it clear that the house is a necessity for Behrani and his advancement in society. Dubus does provide a space for Behrani’s voice, not by writing a novel that depicts a man succeeding in a society that attempts to suppress him, but by communicating a scathing, realistic depiction of a society that does not allow a man to succeed because of this suppression.
Dubus also makes clear the suppression of internally colonized people by exposing some of the marked differences between the physical living spaces of the dominant culture and of the colonized. First, it is important to explain that not all internally colonized groups of people will experience these differences; however, the Iranian family in this novel does find that a typical American house is not an optimal living space for them. For example, the Behranis, like many Iranian families, do not eat at a dining room table in a separate room. The Behranis eat on a “sofreh,” which is placed on the floor in the living room, in the Behranis’ case (23). Therefore, a typical dining room would not be a functional or appropriate space for the Behranis. Behran also notes that the countertop and bar stools in the kitchen just waste space in the Behran house, whereas a typical white American family would most likely not find the bar area intrusive; Behrani narrates, “I lie back upon one elbow on the carpet, but I can no longer see my wife in the kitchen area due to the bar counter and its stools. This is something quite western, the design of a drinking saloon in one’s own home, and if I were not planning to sell the property to Americans, I would have it removed” (55). Behrani also has a widow’s walk constructed in front of the kitchen window to increase the value of the house, even though his wife will be saddened by her obstructed view (56); Nadi values and enjoys her kitchen window view, but Behrani overlooks this sacrifice to increase the value of the house for American buyers. By highlighting such structural differences for readers, Dubus shows how even physical space in America does not allow for the smooth integration of immigrant families.

Dubus’ manipulation of language throughout *House of Sand and Fog* also allows readers to perceive the struggle a suppressed voice must endure. In the beginning of the novel, Behrani attempts to speak English, rather than Farsi, because he knows that speaking his own language will allow for even greater suppression than he already experiences. He also advises his wife
and son to speak English, conforming to Said’s assertion that both colonized and colonizer acknowledge “European superiority over Oriental backwardness . . .” (1995). While his son Esmail speaks English well, his wife Nadi does not, and Behrani constantly advises her to speak to him in English rather than in the language she finds comforting. However, while Behrani initially encourages Nadi to speak only English, near the end of the novel, after Esmail’s death, he realizes that speaking English no more liberates his voice than did buying Kathy’s house, as speaking the colonizer’s language only reinforces the hierarchy of colonizer / colonized. When Behrani witnesses the death of his only son, he screams “Nakhreh! Nakhreh! Nakhreh!” (321), and even though most readers cannot translate this exclamation, they can still understand Behrani’s pain, recognize his voice. Dubus explains that Behrani continues “saying the same Persian sentence over and over again to his son” (322), and Dubus later notes, “Behrani [is] screaming only in Farsi now, a deep, guttural slash of vowels and consonants that sounded to Lester like a thousand-year curse on them all” (324). Also, Behrani notices the blood on his hands from Esmail’s wound, and calls the blood “khoon” (327). Readers recognize this word later when Behrani speaks it again, and this time readers need no translation: “I wipe the khoon from my eye and feel beside me the empty seat where sat my son” (334). Behrani also incorporates the word “peerhan” into his narration, and he again offers no translation (332). Readers know that the word refers to Behrani’s shirt, and Dubus allows Behrani the authority to speak in his own language without cumbersome translations. Behrani’s voice, at the novel’s end, regains power, demands acknowledgement, and he speaks these words in Farsi.

Communicating the uncertainty of identity that Behrani experiences proves yet another way in which Dubus illustrates the suppression of marginalized voices. Saussure, in *Course in General Linguistics*, argues that while an object might exist before its validation through
language, the reality of this object might remain in question until its verbalization, and Behrani’s repeating his name illustrates an attempt to liberate his voice, make his voice real. Many novels only provide a character’s full name once, if that, but Dubus provides Behrani’s full name – complete with military title – several times in House of Sand and Fog. In the novel’s beginning, when Behrani cannot believe that his boss on the road repair crew speaks to him condescendingly, Behrani narrates, “He says to me, to Genob Sarhang Massoud Amir Behrani” (16). Behrani needs to affirm his own identity, because his surroundings certainly are not going to acknowledge his status. Again, when Behrani convinces himself that going to the house auction is the right decision, he recites his full name, attempting to verify his existence verbally: “Colonel Massoud Amir Behrani knows what he is doing” (24). He again restates his name when he decides to leave the apartment building and move into his newly acquired house, again when he meets Kathy’s lawyer, and again much later in the novel, when Lester forces him and his family into the bathroom for an entire night (33, 103, 288). Behrani, an Iranian living in America, must acknowledge his own voice, as the society surrounding him will not affirm his existence. Behrani states his full name once more, as he dresses in his military uniform, preparing to take his own life: “. . . Genob Sarhang Behrani, Honorable Colonel Massoud Amir Behrani” (337). Behrani’s constant need to reaffirm his identity by reciting his full name illustrates how unsure he is about his voice, through no fault of his own.

Behrani also experiences uncertainty in his identity because his military status is not honored – let alone acknowledged – in America. Behrani frequently recalls meetings with his military acquaintances, fondly remembering the sense of dignity and pride those meetings stirred in him. Behrani explains that the group of men “prided [themselves] on being not simply high officers, but Persian gentleman as well” (60), and admits that he has “wished for that sort of
company today” (58). Behrani, who does not wear his uniform in the United States as he has no reason to, also seems to miss the authority and respect his uniform awarded him. Behrani describes the privileges he and his wife had in Iran because of his military position: “. . . I would order Bahman to drive our family to the finest movie house in Tehran and of course there would be a long queue of people waiting, but I was dressed in my uniform so we never waited, we never even paid; we were ushered up to the balcony reserved for the Very Important People, away from the crowd” (58). In America, though, even Nadi notices how lack of military affiliation affects Behrani’s sense of pride: “You could never live in the street because there no one would respect you, even strangers must respect you. Here your uniform means nothing and this is killing you” (285). The aspect of Behrani’s life with which he most closely associates his identity is not acknowledged in America, and the only way Behrani can return to the respect he associates with military life is to dress in full uniform and take his own life. After dressing carefully in full uniform, Behrani seems more secure in his own identity:

In my office I unwrap my uniform shoes, black and shiny and free of dust. I tie them securely with a double knot, then rise and slip into my jacket, each shoulder heavy with red-and-gold epaulet, my breast pocket covered with the ribbons, emblems, and badges of my service. I secure the middle buttons and I stand at full attention, Genob Sarhang Behrani, Honorable Colonel Massoud Amir Behrani. (336-37)

Dubus shows readers how Behrani’s sense of identity is completely stripped in America, and only when Behrani puts on his military uniform does he feel the same sense of honor and dignity he left behind in Iran.

In addition to Behrani revealing uncertainty about his identity, other characters emerge as unsure of Behrani’s identity as well. The Behranis come from Iran, but it takes Lester and
Kathy, among others, over 250 pages to realize this fact. Kathy and Lester both call the Behranis “Arabs” or “Arabic,” and the lack of distinction might greatly insult an Iranian. Kathy’s lawyer calls Behrani “Mr. Barmeeny” (103), and Kathy calls the Behranis “Bahroony” and “Behmini” (78). Granted, it might be difficult to understand how to correctly pronounce “Behrani,” but to lack the consideration to ask how to correctly pronounce the last name displays the suppression of the Iranian voice; by not valuing the Behranis enough to correctly address them, Kathy and her lawyer communicate disdain and disrespect, however intentional or not their actions might prove. By not correctly addressing the Behranis, by not allowing them accurate signification, Kathy and her lawyer undermine the reality and worth of the family. Dubus proves the existence of a text that recognizes marginalized voices, without writing solely “[s]tinging denunciations” or “exposing . . . distressing conditions and passions which find their outlet in expression . . .” (Fanon 1589), but by delving simultaneously into issues of class, race, language, and identity.

While Dubus’ novel does focus on the suppression of immigrant Iranians in American society, it does not dangerously imply that Iranians are only victims – or the only victims – in internal colonization. There are several instances in *House of Sand and Fog* when other minority groups and even white Americans are stereotyped or portrayed negatively by either the Behranis or Kathy, and Dubus’ decision to include such instances provides readers with a more realistic representation of racism and ethnocentrism in current American society. For example, Nadi Behrani yells at her husband that “she did not come to America to live like a dirty Arab” (29), and later Behrani yells back, insisting that he “did not come [to America] to work like an Arab” or “[t]o be treated like an Arab” (33). By showing that the Iranians in the novel are not exempt from blame, that they too sometimes stereotype and reject people unlike them, Dubus suggests to readers that the problem of ethnic stereotyping is not as simple as whites rejecting their Others.
Also, Dubus shows readers that, like the other characters in the novel who identify the Behranis as Arabic, the Behranis also misidentify ethnicities. When Nadi asks Kathy if Kathy’s family is “Greek, or Armenian,” Kathy replies that she is Italian (192). Nadi then begins to express her love for Italian people, speaking of Italians as if they were all alike, and even basing her love of all Italians on her love for Sophia Loren (192). In doing so, Nadi is viewing Italians as a homogenous group of people, even though she would take offense if someone were to assume that all Iranians were alike. Even Behrani, who reacts violently if misidentified or stereotyped, categorizes the men he works with on the highway by their “home countr[ies]” (301), and he often stereotypes the various groups; he describes his road crew as “the old Vietnamese, the fat and lazy Panamanians, the pig Mendez, the Chinese who smoked cigarettes as if it was air they had imported from their home country” (300-301). If Dubus had decided to present racism and ethnocentrism as solely white, middle-class American traits, he would have drastically oversimplified the problem American society has with blindly grouping citizens by their country of origin and/or stereotyping certain groups of people based on their ethnicity.

Dubus also makes it clear to readers that Iranians are not the only minority in America stereotyped by the dominant population, again complicating the implications of his novel beyond suggesting that solely Iranians are the victims of prejudice and misrepresentation and that white Americans are the only group with biases and distorted perceptions. As Kathy stands outside a gas station at a pay phone, she notices “[t]hree Chicano boys” looking at her “from head to toe” (196). She later describes how “[o]ne of the Chicano boys leaned his face out the window, looked at [her] crotch, and slowly licked his upper lip” (198). This is not the only negative representation of Spanish-speaking people, either; when Lester decides to break up a fight at a gas station, the Latino involved in the fight is described as wearing a black t-shirt and marked
with prison tattoos, and he is kicking another man in the head, neck, back, chest, and stomach (228). At first the perpetuation of this stereotype appears out of place in a novel that seems to hope for a society that rejects the lethal suppression of people like the Behranis, but perhaps Dubus uses these mentions to allude to the myriad other ethnic groups internally colonized by dominant American society. Also, Dubus’ decision to include these passages acknowledges that some individuals do indeed perpetuate the stereotypes placed on people of their ethnic background; to suggest otherwise would be as blind as to suggest that all members of a particular group will perform the stereotypical behaviors associated with that group. Dubus complicates issues of racism and ethnocentrism beyond issues of Iranian suppression and white American faults, creating a novel that more closely represents reality.

Colonization of Dominant Culture within Dominant Culture

The same sun shines on the Middle East as on the United States, and Dubus draws readers’ attention to this connection: “. . . we drove down through the one-story shops and stores of Corona, then onto the Cabrillo Highway, the sky plum and green, the sun out of sight, already on its way to shine on Asia, and the Middle East” (132). Dubus succeeds in undoing the exoticism associated with the “Other,” articulated in Said’s Orientalism, by comparing Kathy to Behrani, America to Iran. Said argues that “[t]he nexus of knowledge and power” creates “[t]he Oriental’ and in a sense [obliterates] him as a human being” (2011), and the undoing of this exoticism allows for the liberation of Behrani and also acknowledges the suppression that often occurs to dominant, yet marginalized, people within a dominant culture. Throughout the novel, Dubus links the United States to Iran using subtle, yet pointed, details.
For one, Dubus covertly compares Lester Burdon to the Iranian secret police force SAVAK. The SAVAK worked to perpetuate the Shah’s rule in Iran, but did so through illegal means, such as torture and murder. Burdon, early in his career, took similar actions; he did not torture or murder anyone, but he used illegal means to reach a desired goal. When Burdon could find no other way to arrest a chronically abusive husband, as the wife would not file a complaint, he planted drugs in the man’s closet (112). Burdon’s illegal actions were justified in his eyes; the abusive man was arrested for drug possession. However, like the SAVAK, he performed an illegal action to obtain his desired result. Burdon also commits adultery, breaks into the Behrani’s house, brandishes a weapon, and locks the colonel and his family in the bathroom for an entire night. His actions, while aimed at what he deems a virtuous outcome, reflect the SAVAK’s disregard of the law.

Also, a Savaki once informed Behrani, “If you want real information, you must take their children. Make a subversive watch his little one lose a hand or arm and they will tell you everything” (61). Later in the novel, when Burdon tries to scare the Behranis out of Kathy’s house, he threatens deportation, even though the Behranis cannot actually be deported: “You have a family. I’d be thinking more about them if I were you. I have more than one contact at Immigration. People get deported every single day” (168). Burdon threatens Behrani’s wife and children to incite action in Behrani, to drive Behrani to return the house he legally purchased, much as a Savaki would threaten the family of “a subversive” (61). When Burdon goes to the house to threaten deportation, he purposefully removes his nametag before speaking to Behrani, hiding his identity like the “men who could not be traced . . . . Dark men in dark suits. Savakis” (170). Burdon can be traced, because of his uniform, field officer pin, and underestimation of Behrani, but he nonetheless attempts to hide his identity like a member of the secret police force.
Later, Burdon forces Behrani to drive him to the courthouse to sell the house back to the county and give the money to Kathy. Instead of solely taking Behrani, though, Burdon insists that Esmail, Behrani’s son, accompany them. Burdon puts Esmail in danger, and he knows that Behrani will not try to escape if doing so would result in Esmail’s being hurt. Behrani moved his family from Iran to protect them, and now Burdon threatens him and his family in the same way the SAVAK threatened subversives.

In another attempt to draw readers’ attention to the similarities between Iran and the United States, Dubus makes connections between Iranian and American characters. Behrani often refers to Kathy as “gendeh,” which means “whore” in Farsi, and later reveals the story of his “gendeh” cousin, Jasmeen (150). Behrani begins revealing this story after thinking of Kathy: “I must weigh my options regarding this Kathy Nicolo, but my hand trembles, my mind roaming elsewhere, to Jasmeen . . .” (150). Jasmeen had an affair with an American, and when her father found out, he beat her and called her “Gendah! Whore!” (151). Eventually, Jasmeen’s father drags her into the street and shoots her, and Behrani recalls this story often: “And over the years I have dreamed of Jasmeen in white falling to the ground, [her father] standing over her as she attempted in vain to keep life from leaving her, pressing her hands to the torn opening between her breasts” (153). Behrani hates his uncle for Jasmeen’s murder, “believing he had acted rashly and with too much passion,” but Behrani calls Kathy a whore, bruises her wrists, and eventually crushes her throat in an attempt to strangle her, displaying the rash burst of passion he hates in his uncle (152). When Behrani thinks of the “difficulties” he faces because of his unwillingness to return the house, Dubus writes, in Behrani’s narrative voice, “A heaviness of heart possesses me on our new widow’s walk. Its cause is remembering Jasmeen . . .” (163). Soon after Behrani brings Kathy into his house, taking the pistol with which Kathy attempted to kill herself, he again
recalls his cousin: “Beneath her brightly colored Fisherman’s Wharf T-shirt her breasts barely rise and fall, and I regard the pistol in my hands, see Jasmeen falling to the ground, her long hair untamed, her hand pressed between her breasts, her white gown growing red as saffron” (216). Behrani cannot help but compare this “whore” to his beloved cousin. After Behrani, in a fit of rash passion, attempts to strangle Kathy, he again recalls his cousin: “I think of Jasmeen, my dear cousin. I lift the whore and pull her onto the seat and bend her knees to shut the door and I think of what I will tell Jasmeen, that I loved her always, that [her brother] and I wept for her” (338). By making clear connections between Kathy and Jasmeen, Dubus further highlights the suppression of Kathy’s voice, and the similarities between Iran and America should become more perceptible to readers.

Dubus also compares other characters who live in America to characters from Iran. Behrani recalls how Pourat, a close friend from Iran, was killed by revolutionaries: “And I am haunted once again with a picture of my dear friend’s body hanging by its feet above the tarmac, the tails of his suit coat covering his head, blood dripping from the sleeves” (188). Pourat’s wife and children were also killed, and readers should not ignore the similarities between the deaths of Pourat and his family and Behrani and his family. In addition to comparing Pourat’s family to Behrani’s, Dubus compares Kathy to Behrani’s daughter, Soraya. When Kathy visits Behrani’s wife, Nadi, in an attempt to reason with her, Nadi tells Kathy, “‘You could be twin of our Soraya. You look as her, you see?’” (192). Kathy notices that she and Soraya look nothing alike, but also notices that Nadi “meant what she said” (192). Behrani even realizes at one point that Lester looks Iranian: “[His eyes] are dark and set deeply into his face. His hair and mustache are dark as well and it occurs to me he looks very much like Nadereh’s younger brother Ali” (266). Dubus creates a way for readers to acknowledge the similarities between Iran
and the United States by drawing subtle parallels between individuals from each country. This serves two functions: the Iranian voice can begin to be heard if Iranian characters appear similar to American characters, and readers can begin to realize that Americans endure oppression similar to that of Iranians. It is regrettable, in this point of analysis, that the Iranian voice can only be acknowledged by relating it to the voice of the colonizer, but if these comparisons allow readers to begin to accept that Iranians do indeed possess a unique voice, and incite the beginning stages of a system that will allow the Iranian voice to be heard not as an “Other,” but as its own independent “Self,” then the analysis serves its purpose.

Dubus also succeeds in relating Kathy to Behrani, even though the characters do not outwardly display any common characteristics. Behrani, a married Iranian ex-colonel, and Kathy, an American divorcée and rehabilitated drug addict who cleans houses for a living, seem to share no characteristics. However, for one, both characters experience the complete destruction of their lives. This common characteristic might seem obvious, but Dubus does not describe at length Behrani’s losses in Iran, so some readers might miss the connection. Behrani loses his house on the Caspian Sea, he temporarily loses his wife’s respect for forcing her to leave Iran, and he cannot climb out of the financial cul-de-sac created by working long hours at a low-paying job. Similarly, Kathy loses her house to Behrani, loses her husband, and works long hours at a low-paying job to make just enough money to survive. These hardships drive both characters to eventually attempt suicide, but only Behrani succeeds in this goal. Both characters could see no other way out of the situation America created for them, so they result to attempting to take their own lives. Kathy feels trapped because the county evicted her for not paying an inaccurately-charged business tax, and Behrani feels trapped because he legally bought a house that the county now wants back, but he cannot return it because his family’s future depends on
the money he will make reselling the house at a higher price. Dubus first reveals the suppression of Behrani’s voice by writing of the government’s request that the purchase of his legally acquired house be rescinded, but acknowledges his voice by the novel’s end. Spivak acknowledges that speaking depends on “a distanced decipherment by another” (*A Critique* 309), and the government deciphers Behrani’s voice after his suicide by putting Kathy and Lester in jail. However, Kathy’s voice is suppressed in the acknowledgement of Behrani’s by the system that privileges her because of race but oppresses her because of her class and sex. Behrani’s voice is liberated only in death, and Kathy’s voice is subsequently suppressed. Dubus illustrates that the destruction of both characters cannot be avoided – neither Kathy nor Behrani can find a peaceful, reasonable way to coexist.

While Dubus depicts the colonization of America by comparing individuals from both the United States and Iran, he also reveals the colonization of America by crafting careful descriptions of the main characters’ surroundings. These surroundings illustrate the homogenization of America, and one cannot help but view this conformity as a method of colonization. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, observe the “obedience to the social hierarchy” (1228), and Dubus illustrates this societal obedience and willingness to conform. Early in the novel, when Kathy first visits the Legal Aid office, she notices how the people lunching outside the office prove virtually indistinguishable: “. . . west coast men and women eating food like tabouleh salads and miso spread on sesame crackers, the men skinny and clean-shaven, a lot of them with ponytails” (40). The women catch Kathy’s attention even more, though: “. . . but I was really seeing only the women as I went by, their unmade-up look, their long thick hair tied up in back with more hair, their colorful T-shirts, their breasts small, or else hanging long and heavy underneath the cotton they probably only bought from catalogs” (41).
Later, as Kathy waits outside the Hall of Justice to see Lester, she notices another group of women having lunch: “I kept smoking and watched three women in business skirts and blouses sit at a concrete bench not far from my car. They were eating from small plastic yogurt containers. One of them laughed, finished her yogurt, and bit into a cookie” (84). These businesswomen are faceless, all eating the same small lunch – because society tells them they should only eat yogurt and strive for a thin figure – and Kathy decides she would rather not take part in this homogenization: “. . . I felt like I’d been apart from groups of normal people and their nice conversations my whole life. On another day I might’ve let myself feel homeless and husbandless and with no friends, but now I felt almost better than them, tougher, like I knew more about life from having really lived it out here on the rim” (84). Later, as Kathy stands in the middle of a mall, she again notices how people seem to blend together: “They were all copies of each other: they wore jeans three sizes too big, pastel Gap T-shirts tucked in loose or tight – to either show off their breasts or hide them – tacky leather pocketbooks over one shoulder, loose bracelets jangling on their wrists, their makeup too heavy. They all chewed gum, talking at once . . . ” (203). Like Kathy, Behrani notices the willingness of Americans to conform; as Behrani sits outside waiting for Nadi to have her hair done, he observes, “I hear the speech of Orientals, Greeks, Germans, and French. But the majority are the more large, more fed, pink-in-the-face Americans, who carry their shopping bags, eating ice cream cones or drinking sweet sodas from cups as they walk past, their small loud children leading them” (123). Readers should not perceive these detailed descriptions of conformity as by-products of a more important story. Dubus allows readers to sense the colonization of America by describing situations where faces blend together, clothes lose meaning because each piece of clothing mirrors another piece, and conversations contain no substance because every word spoken is polite, repetitive, and
formulaic. The difference, then, between Iran and the United States is that oftentimes Americans conform willingly, peacefully, unknowingly, and Iranians fight to uphold whatever set of values a particular political movement upholds; however, the fact remains that the novel illustrates that both Americans and Iranians experience colonization, making *House of Sand and Fog* a more complex, innovative text.

In addition to describing the people surrounding the main characters, Dubus manipulates the characters’ physical settings in a way that communicates “colonization” to readers. Behrani felt comfortable in a house on the Caspian Sea, where he could clearly view the water, and when he moves into Kathy’s house, he desires similar surroundings; he hires carpenters to construct a widow’s walk on Kathy’s house so he can have a clear view of the ocean. However, the construction of the widow’s walk obscures Nadi’s view from the kitchen window, as I’ve mentioned earlier, but Behrani decides to continue on with the addition. Also, the widow’s walk is constructed to increase the monetary worth of the house, and the Behranis only visit the widow’s walk when they are trying to impress Soraya’s new in-laws. In America, it seems that construction diminishes connection to the natural world; Behrani must conform to society’s demands and increase the value of the house rather than allow Nadi to maintain the simple view she enjoys from the window. The land is literally colonized for money and status, and this is further exemplified by Dubus’ descriptions of the glass and metal city in which the Behranis live: “Across the street from the Hall of Justice was an old courthouse building with a huge dome of stained glass, and there were no trees on either side of the main street, just parking meters and shining cars” (83). Dubus also describes the area in front of the courthouse as a “bright concrete yard” (317), and later describes the inside of the building: “I enter this Hall of Justice building, how it is I must walk through the clean glass door over the hard and shining floor to the elevators
. . .” (332). To Behrani, the harsh lines of commercial American architecture must startlingly contrast to his house in Iran overlooking the Caspian Sea, and Dubus describes America in a way that makes readers notice the starkness and sterility of American architecture as well.

Similarly, Kathy finds herself comfortable during her stay in a small cabin in the woods. A friend of Lester’s loaned the cabin to him after hearing of his separation, and Kathy works hard to clean the cabin and make it feel like home. Kathy and Lester acknowledge “the fact that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1224), and they attempt to avoid this societal power by retreating to a less commoditized space. Kathy and Lester both unabashedly display their sexuality, bathe in the river, live a more simple life without electricity, and Kathy, for a moment, is happier in the woods than she was bathing in her house and watching movie after movie. Here, Dubus seems to observe that existing in a less “colonized” area allows people to live more satisfying, tangible lives. When readers compare this forest scene with the street in town that has “no trees on either side of the main street, just parking meters and shining cars” (83), they cannot ignore the gradual colonization of American soil. Dubus subtly notes how not only people, but also areas of land, are colonized in America. In this scenario, Kathy cannot be termed “colonizer” – she lost her home, retreated to the forest, and only asked for what legally belonged to her. *House of Sand and Fog* not only forces readers to acknowledge the silencing of marginalized voices, but also of American voices, suggesting that they too are marginalized.

Because of this government, the government that lines streets with parking meters and cars, that increases property value for a foreboding, clumsy addition of a widow’s walk that provides a “view” of the far-off ocean, Behrani, Nadi, and Esmail lose their lives, and Kathy and
Lester find themselves in jail. Not only do Behrani, Nadi, and Esmail literally lose their voices in death, reflecting the suppression of voice they experienced in life, but Kathy also loses her voice, more literally. When Behrani attempts to strangle Kathy, he damages her esophagus, and doctors tell Kathy not to speak for a couple of weeks. Later, when Kathy realizes she can speak again, she decides to remain silent. The loss of Kathy’s voice suggests that Americans, too, must recognize their suppression of voice. Dubus manages, in one intricate text, to address the issue of the suppression of marginalized voices and also the issue of the suppression of the perceived colonizer. Although the Behranis die in the novel’s end, Dubus creates a story that communicates the suppression of Iranian voice, that forces readers to acknowledge a flaw in society, and so the family’s death allows for freedom of voice.
CHAPTER III. FEMINIST IMPLICATIONS

In addition to commenting on the postcolonial implications of Dubus’ *House of Sand and Fog*, I found it important also to provide an analysis of the feminist implications of the text. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak notes the Western tradition of marginalizing both women and those identified as Other: “The marginal in the narrow sense are the victims of the best-known history of centralization: the emergence of the straight white christian man of property as the ethical subject” (176). This observation is one widely acknowledged – and practiced – in American society, and Dubus’ novel illustrates the destructiveness of such a societal hierarchy.

This section of my study will focus on the two main female characters in the text: Kathy Nicolo and Nadi Behrani. Even though Kathy is the female character who actually narrates some of the novel, it is important for me also to acknowledge Nadi’s place in the novel. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak observes “that a plangent female individualist . . ., emerging as the favored subject/object of feminism/masculism, often allows an other woman to disappear” (352), and I did not want to let a character like Kathy overshadow the importance of Nadi’s role in *House of Sand and Fog*. Mohanty explains how “. . . Third World women’s writings on feminism have consistently focused on the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions . . .” (52), and this certainly applies to Nadi.

Also, before going into any analysis, it is crucial to make two aspects of my approach clear. For one, it must be made apparent that my intention is not to put forth readings of Kathy and Nadi that represent all white American or Iranian women. Kathy’s experiences and characteristics are clearly not representative of all white women in America, and Nadi’s experiences and characteristics are no more representative of all Iranian women in America. In
Voices From Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women, Kousha articulates the necessity of my clarifying my intentions: “No single image adequately can reveal the complexity of the lives that Iranian women can live. To expect a manufactured image to explain amply the existence of more than thirty million women is unrealistic; no single image adequately can reveal the totality of any one person, let alone millions of people” (4). Similarly, no “single image” of a white American female can “reveal the complexity” of what it means to be a white American female.

The second aspect of my approach that needs to be detailed is that I am not reading Kathy and Nadi using Western feminism as my main framework. As Mohanty mentions in her Feminism Without Borders, “Unlike the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms, which has been explored in great detail over the last few decades, histories of Third World women’s engagement with feminism are in short supply” (Mohanty 45). However, I cannot apply a Western feminist framework to a Third World woman like Nadi without misrepresenting her. Spivak warns, “. . . when we are ignorant of the historical frame . . . insistence on this sort of pop-psych irony most often springs from the imposition of our own historical and voluntarist constitution within the second wave of U.S. academic feminism as a ‘universal’ model of the ‘natural’ reactions of the female mind” (A Critique 164); therefore, Nadi cannot be read adequately using a framework that disregards her cultural and historical “frame.” Mohanty further warns against applying the same framework to all Third World women:

The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of Third World feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. It is not color or sex that constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender – the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. (46)
In my approach to *House of Sand and Fog*, then, I will be reading each woman as unique in her own experience, paying close attention to the politics surrounding each woman’s situation.

To begin, Dubus makes it clear that although the women in his novel both endure types of oppression, they do not necessarily possess identical viewpoints or share a common “female” point of view that supersedes male shortcomings. At one point in the novel, Dubus seems to give readers some hope that the females will be able to solve the dispute over the house, but this hope is never fully realized. As Kathy gets dressed after taking a shower at one of her client’s houses, she narrates, “Somewhere between the fish camp and here I’d decided . . . [the colonel’s wife is] who I had to talk to. If she really didn’t know the situation, then I would tell her. Just drive up there, wait for her husband to leave, and talk. No threats. No men shoving their weight around. Just two women talking out our problem” (182). After the two women meet, though, it is clear that they will not be able wholly to resolve the conflict. Nadi cannot understand much English, so she asks Kathy to write down her argument so she can then present it to her husband. Behrani returns to the house while Kathy is still there, and he forces her to leave despite Nadi’s pleading with him to listen to Kathy. Even if Behrani had not interrupted the women, though, Nadi would not have been able to understand the whole situation; Behrani does not include her in the details of his transactions, and Nadi follows her husband’s wishes even if she does not completely agree with his decisions. *The Koran* states, “Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women” (33), and Nadi adheres to this decree. The women’s differences make it impossible for them to resolve this conflict. Dubus’ decision to present Kathy and Nadi in this way supports Mohanty’s resistance to the notion of a universal female connection and the blind, unconditional linking of all females simply because they are female; she writes: “. . . ideological differences in
understandings of the social mediate any assumption of a natural bond between women. After all, there is no logical and necessary connection between being female and becoming feminist” (49). If Dubus had presented the two females as possessing some type of subliminal female connection, his novel would only perpetuate the homogenization of all females, and that would conflict with much of what many Third World feminists propose.

In addition to acknowledging the differences between Kathy and Nadi through their interactions with each other, Dubus makes clear distinctions between them through their interactions with men. Again, instead of viewing one female as subservient and one as liberated, it is crucial at this point to remember that the two women are acting in different political spheres; what may be considered subservient to Kathy may be viewed as liberating for Nadi, and vice versa. One way Dubus highlights the differences between the two women is by presenting their sex lives in drastically different ways. When Dubus writes of Nadi and Behrani having sex, he does not describe the encounter in detail. For example, the first time readers are told that Nadi and Behrani have sex, Dubus writes:

All I can be certain of is yesterday God kissed our eyes, and last evening my wife invited me to her room for only the third time in the years we have lived in America. We lay together in the darkness listening to a new cassette of a singer reciting the rubaiyats of Fayez Dashtestanti. . . . I felt I was a young man again, lying with my new bride. Nadi held my back so tightly and I saw again my father on our wedding day carrying the fat sheep to the doorway of our new home. . . . My wife moved to rest my face upon her shoulder and she rubbed her fingers gently on the skin of my head as if I were her own child. (69)
Dubus details the scene in a sensitive and fairly non-sexual way, even comparing Behrani to a child. When he describes Kathy and Lester having sex, though, his language is much more explicit:

> My legs were parted and he was rubbing my foot with both hands, smiling up into my face, his mustache a straight line, his deep brown eyes as warm as any I’d ever seen. I was suddenly wet and I stood, twisted from him his hands, and lay back on the bed, opening my towel for him, and almost immediately he was inside me again, his pants around his ankles, his star and name tag pushing against my skin. (99)

Dubus is careful not to present the two women as identical, taking cultural differences into consideration. Readers know that Nadi and Behrani sleep in separate rooms, and they know that Nadi has only invited Behrani to her room three times since the family moved to the United States. If Dubus were to describe the sex scene between Nadi and Behrani in a more explicit manner, he would not be respecting the cultural codes set in place by his more conservative presentation of sexual relations between husband and wife. For Kathy, though, a more detailed description of her sexual activities does not break any cultural boundaries or codes, especially because Kathy is the narrator of these scenes.

In addition to presenting Nadi’s sex life in a distinctly different manner than he does Kathy’s, Dubus draws readers’ attention to other differences between how the two females function in their relationships with men. His decision to do so without clearly valuing one type of female/male relationship over the other again supports the notion that all women cannot automatically be lumped together into the category “female” and be studied with a Western feminist framework. Dubus resists presenting Nadi as either subservient Third World female or newly-liberated, rebellious Third World female, complicating her character beyond the
dichotomy of expectations for Third World women in the United States. At first it might seem as though Nadi fits the stereotype of submissive Third World wife, as she frequently and unquestioningly agrees with Behrani’s decisions; for example, Nadi packed Behrani’s lunch every day when he was working on the highway (18). However, Behrani makes it clear to readers that even though he often appears in charge of his family, he does listen to Nadi and respect her a great deal. When the Behranis are still living in their overpriced apartment, Behrani notes, “Of course I argued many times for a more reasonable place to live, but Nadi fought me; we must keep up our appearance” (19). He later adds, “If I had been stronger with [Nadi], if I had not been so sure I would have work soon with Boeing or Lock-heed, making a respectable salary, then I most for certain would have invested in real estate” (19). Even from the beginning of the novel, Dubus makes it clear that Nadi will not serve as a stereotypical or flat character. The complexity of Nadi’s character is also made apparent when Behrani tells Nadi that they can stay at the new house longer than he had originally intended; at first, she answers only, “I will do as you wish, Massoud” (63). Then Behrani’s narration continues:

I stand and hold my wife, and for a brief moment she allows this. I feel the softness of her chest against me. I smell her clean hair, the familiar scent of lavender and tea. But she steps away and walks quickly down the corridor to her work. Nadi has always had more pride than a queen, and I am certain what just happened between us was an apology. But as I sit at my desk, I feel that caged heaviness in my belly that comes with a failure of courage, for it is I who should apologize . . . (63)

By writing that Nadi “allows” Behrani to hold her, Dubus is communicating to readers that Nadi still possesses a significant amount of control in her relationship with Behrani; the often passive and culturally coded way Nadi expresses her control, though, is certainly different from how a
First World feminist might express control. Ultimately, Dubus gives Nadi agency, breaking the traditional depiction of Third World woman as either entirely rebellious or entirely submissive.

Readers could at first question this control, though, considering that Behrani admits to hitting his wife. Near the beginning of the novel, readers learn that Behrani hits Nadi after she blames him for having to leave Iran: “It was then that I hit my wife very hard across the face with my open hand and she fell to the floor and lay there crying, ‘Man meekham bemiram.’ I want to die, she wept. I want to die” (57). Later in the novel Behrani admits, “The hurting of women I have not approved of, though, yes, I have struck my wife on occasion, but I regretted each incident deeply” (153). He goes on to explain one specific incident, and makes his regret clear:

Once at our home in Tehran, I slapped Nadi’s face for raising her voice to me in the presence of a junior officer. Her eyes filled with sadness and humiliation and she ran crying from the room. Later that evening, when she would still to me not speak, I rolled up my shirtsleeve, lighted a Turkish cigar, and pressed the glowing ash into my flesh. I wanted to cry out, but did not. I relighted the cigar and burned myself again. I did this five times, and I asked God for forgiveness with each burning of the flesh. (153)

Even though Behrani does physically assault his wife several times, Nadi is not presented as a woman who has no agency in her relationship with her husband. Behrani only hits Nadi in situations where she challenges his authority or blames him for something, making her own opinion clear. Behrani reacts violently because he is not used to such confrontation from females, and after the altercations, he always seems very embarrassed of his behavior and guilty of his mistreatment of a woman he clearly respects.
Dubus’ treatment of Kathy throughout the novel is similar in that he avoids presenting her as a predictable stock character who lacks complexity. However, he does make distinctions between the women, again resisting the notion that a universal female identity applies to all women. Kathy’s agency is less apparent than Nadi’s in a lot of ways, which is somewhat surprising considering that readers might expect the white female in the novel to have more control over her situation than a Third World female. Kathy is consistently attaching herself to men, and it often seems as if she is unable to function on her own. After her marriage to Nick disintegrates, she falls into the routine of renting numerous movies and having little contact with people; she explains: “I’d rent two or three movies and watch them back to back. Sometimes I’d even start in the late afternoon. Including weekends I averaged close to twenty a week” (67). She also reveals how she lies to her mother “about making friends and taking care of [herself]” (44), even though that is far from the truth. Then when she is evicted, she quickly latches on to Lester Burdon. She has no idea what to do after being told she must leave her house immediately, and it is Lester who guides her through the process; he gives her the name of a Legal Aid office, calls a moving company, takes personal time off to help her move her belongings out of the house, and suggests that she take everything to a storage facility (36-37).

It is hard to classify Kathy as independent because she seems to rely so heavily on the help of the males in her life; however, Dubus’ decision to make Kathy a less independent character than Nadi only adds to the complexity of his presentation of females in his novel. Both women are clearly trying to function in a male-dominated realm, and each ultimately maintains some agency in her own way. For Nadi, challenging her husband when she feels strongly opposed to his actions while simultaneously maintaining his admiration, devotion, and respect illustrates that she possesses more control in their relationship than initially appears. For Kathy, though, agency
only comes when she no longer relies on her relationships with men. After relying first on her father, who left her the house, then her brother, then Nick, then Lester, Kathy can only claim agency in the all-female prison at the novel’s end. After revealing that she “feel[s] sure now” that she will never again be with Lester, Kathy responds to one of her fellow prisoner’s call to come join the rest of the women by “smil[ing] at her and nod[ding] like she’s just said something I never understood before, but now finally do” (364). She then describes walking down to the other female prisoners:

I descend the stairs, my eyes on the wide, flat cloud as I walk down under it, this blue ceiling of smoke we make. And I feel it above me as I move past the women at the phones, past other women at other tables, all of the smoking, blowing out thin angry streams into the air, and I stand at Jolene’s shoulder. She stops dealing and looks up at me, her dark eyes waiting, though she’s never heard me speak, and I nod at her pack of Marlboro Lights. At first she doesn’t seem to understand what I want, but then I smile, and put two fingers to my lips. (365)

Kathy only seems to be able to make decisions for herself when she is removed from the male-dominated world that has controlled her from the time she was born, and the prison provides this removal.

Although the ways in which Kathy and Nadi gain some agency in their relationships with males are fairly different, the two women have one very similar restriction placed on them as females living in the United States: neither one can fully own the space in which she lives. Although Nadi does have a very sacred space within the Behrani family’s house – her private bedroom – her husband determines when and where the family will move. When Lester attempts to force Behrani to sign the house back over to Kathy, Nadi does not even need to be involved,
as her name does not appear on any of the paperwork regarding ownership of the house. The property belongs to Behrani, not Nadi, and even though Nadi is given a space within the house, she does not legally own any of the space she occupies. Dubus makes it clear that it is difficult for this Third World female to own a physical space in the United States.

Similarly, Kathy cannot actually own the house either, as the house was passed from her father to both her and her brother. Even if the house were entirely legally hers, the county erroneously seizes the property, and Kathy is again denied legal access to a physical space in the United States. Dubus’ novel highlights the fact that even though it often appears that females are legally equal to males, it is difficult for many women in the United States to be perceived by the government as property-holding citizens. If, as Spivak suggests, “the ethical subject” is often presented as a “straight white christian man of property” (A Critique 176), then both Nadi and Kathy are even further removed from this Eurocentric ideal because of the fact that owning property appears to be fairly difficult for females in this novel.

Lastly, another similarity between the two main females in this novel is the fact that both must struggle immensely to have their voices recognized. Again, this similarity is not revealed to readers through an identical presentation of the two women, as that would be assuming that all women, no matter what their political and historical situation, can be read using a Western feminist framework. For one, the suppression of Nadi’s voice is made apparent through her inability and resistance to speaking English instead of Farsi while living in a country that privileges English-speaking citizens, whereas Kathy’s suppression of voice is made apparent through the physical loss of her voice when Behrani attempts to strangle her after the death of his son Esmail. When Nadi speaks English, she often uses incorrect prepositions, and she usually precedes any English statements with short Farsi expressions: “‘Hafesho, Behrani! What is the
matter for you? Please” (28). Nadi tries to please her husband by speaking English, the language Behrani initially believes will liberate his voice, but she never fully grasps it. For Nadi, the struggle of voice in the colonizer country is clear: if she speaks English, her husband is pleased, but the language is not her native language, so she struggles; if she speaks Farsi, her husband is angry, and English-speaking characters do not even correctly identify her language, calling it “Arabic or Israeli” (73). Dubus clearly illustrates the internally colonized person’s struggle for a voice that is not critically viewed by either members of the colonizing society or members of one’s own colonized group.

It could be argued, too, that Behrani’s decision to kill his wife without her consent is also a situation where Nadi’s voice is clearly oppressed, but that argument should not be made without closer consideration. Even though Behrani does kill his wife, he does so to protect her from the sorrow she would certainly feel upon learning of her son’s death. The Koran states, “A mother should not be allowed to suffer on account of her child, nor should a father on account of his child” (34), and Behrani’s decision to take his wife’s life and then his own suggests an attempt to spare Nadi the suffering of dealing with a child’s death. In this context, it cannot be unquestionably argued, then, that Behrani’s decision to kill his wife before killing himself is his way of suppressing her voice.

For Kathy, then, the suppression of voice is more literal. After Behrani learns of his son’s death, he returns to his house where Kathy is waiting with Nadi for Behrani, Lester, and Esmail to return from the courthouse. Behrani stumbles across the living room and begins to strangle Kathy:

... I believe there is sound coming from the beggar whore’s mouth but I cannot be certain for my limbs are again iron and my hands are fixed to her neck and throat. I seem
to watch her face from a place higher, this struggling statue of a man and woman, her flesh warm and soft, the tendons her neck I begin to break each at a time. . . . There is no end to my strength or how long I shake her, then her hand slips from my wrists and the bungalow grows silent. (335)

When Kathy wakes up, she is in a hospital, and she is unable to speak. Kathy eventually regains her voice toward the novel’s end, but she decides to remain silent – one of the first decisions she actually makes on her own in the novel. Even though Kathy regains her physical voice and seems to be more in control of her identity in prison with other women, Dubus makes it clear that maintaining a strong female voice in the United States is difficult for Western women as well as Third World women. To make this even more startlingly clear, Dubus reveals one of Kathy’s dreams to readers; Kathy recalls the dream: “Then [Nick and Lester] see me and they both start fucking me, taking turns. Then Lester pulls out and comes onto my hip and side. And he keeps coming. And it starts to cover me, weighing me down, and doesn’t stop, and not it all begins to harden and I’ve become a stone, a smooth white stone among all the black stones” (246). This detailed and violent dream overtly illustrates female oppression in a way that cannot be ignored.

Dubus’ novel communicates the suppression of female agency and voice in the United States without blindly grouping all women into the category of “female,” yet it also succeeds in presenting some common points of oppression for a Western female and a Third World female. Dubus creates complex female characters that resist stereotypical or polar categories, and his novel is certainly successful in highlighting the suppression of female voice.
CHAPTER IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although I feel that, at this point, my intentions for this project have been met, possibilities for further study certainly exist. One related element of how *House of Sand and Fog* contains both postcolonial and feminist implications is how the film version of the novel differs from the novel itself. There are crucial differences between the film and the novel; for example, the film version presents a variation of the novel’s ending. Analyzing exactly why those changes were made and how those changes affect the overall implications of *House of Sand and Fog* would certainly be a valuable undertaking. Also, in this particular study, little attention was paid to the white male character Lester Burdon. Clearly, a closer analysis of Burdon’s character does not fit cleanly into a study devoted to postcolonial and feminist implications of the novel, but in a broader study, attention to how a white male functions in a novel brimming with postcolonial and feminist implications would be a useful expansion.

*House of Sand and Fog* advances postcolonialist theory in that it succeeds in what previous theorists called for and often doubted. Because Dubus allows Kathy and Behrani to narrate side-by-side, rather than creating solely one narrator, Dubus creates a situation that allows for Behrani’s voice without creating a text that functions as merely a lamentation of a suppressed voice. Instead of generating a text that reveals only Behrani’s voice, which would result in readers viewing the text as an “outlet in expression” only to be “assimilated by the occupying power in a cathartic process” (Fanon 1598), Dubus writes a novel that communicates the commonly perceived “dominant” voice as well, exposing the flaws in terming Kathy’s voice as dominant because of the suppression of female voices in the United States. This literary strategy results in a text that succeeds in liberating colonized voices without compromising
integrity with passion, without oversimplifying or overanalyzing beyond comprehension, advancing postcolonial theory to another stage of evolution.

Hopefully, it is now clear that a text like *House of Sand and Fog* deserves further attention in the academic realm. The text can be opened through postcolonial and feminist readings, and I hope my readings of the novel rejuvenate an academic interest in the novel. For some reason, this text has gone relatively unnoticed in academia, and my readings of the text are meant to recover forgotten implications of the text and also introduce some new ones. The unique combination of narrators and focus on Iranians living in the United States makes this novel worth further academic attention.

I want to close this project with a quote from *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi warns, “. . . *do not*, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” (3). This reading of *House of Sand and Fog* is meant to reveal such an “epiphany of truth” rather than argue that the novel flawlessly mirrors life in the United States, for both native Americans and Third World immigrants. The novel’s political and theoretical implications are far more valuable than the novel’s ability to imitate life faultlessly.
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