

Understanding Postcolonial Feminism in relation with Postcolonial and Feminist Theories

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Abstract

Postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in western locations. While postcolonial theorist struggles against the maiden colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting him as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated. She suffers from “double colonization” as she simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression, her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor. In his struggle against the colonizer, he even exploits her by misrepresenting her in the nationalist discourses. Not only that, she also suffers at the hand of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts by imposing silence on their racial, cultural, social, and political specificities, and in so doing, act as potential oppressors of their “sisters”. In this article, I explore these struggles of a postcolonial feminist, for it is in her struggle against the “postcolonial” and “feminist” theorists that she can assert her identity as a “postcolonial feminist.”

Keyword: Postcolonial, Third World Feminism, Western Feminism, Nationalism, Identity, Postcoloniality

Postcolonial, as a term, suggests resistance to “colonial” power and its discourses that continue to shape various cultures, including those whose revolutions have overthrown formal ties to their colonial rulers. Postcolonial theory, therefore, focuses on subverting the colonizer’s discourse that attempts to distort the experience and realities, and inscribe inferiority on the colonized people in order to exercise total control. It is also concerned with the production of literature by colonized peoples that articulates their identity and reclaims their past in the face of that past’s inevitable otherness. The task of a postcolonial theorist is to insert the often ‘absent’ colonized subject into the dominant discourse in a way that it resists/subverts the authority of the colonizer.

Postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in Western locations. It concentrates on construction of gender difference in colonial and anti-colonial discourses, representation of women in anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses with particular reference to the work of women writers. The postcolonial feminist critics raise a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representation of gender.

While postcolonial theorist struggles against the maiden colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting him as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated. She suffers from “double colonization” (a term coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford and refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy). She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor. In his struggle against the colonizer, he even exploits her by misrepresenting her in the nationalist discourses. Not only that, she also suffers at the hands of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts by imposing silence on their racial, cultural, social, and political specificities, and in so doing, act as potential oppressors of their “sisters”. In this article, I explore these challenges of a postcolonial feminist, for it is in her struggle against the “postcolonial” and “feminist” theorists that she can assert her identity as a “postcolonial feminist.”

Postcolonial feminist theory exerts a pressure on mainstream postcolonial theory in its constant iteration of the necessity to consider gender issues. Postcolonialism and feminism have come to share a tense relationship as some feminist critics point out that postcolonial theory is a male-centered field that has not only excluded the concerns of women, but also exploited them. Postcolonial feminist theorists have accused postcolonial theorists not only of obliterating the role of women from the struggle for independence, but also of misrepresenting them in the nationalist discourses. Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* itself accorded little attention to female agency and discussed very few female writers. Homi K. Bhabha's work on the ambivalence of colonial discourses explores the relationship between a "colonizing" subject and a "colonized" object without reference to how the specifics of gender might complicate his model. Critics such as Carole Boyce Davies who are suspicious of the male-centered bias of postcolonial critique often ask "where are the women in the theorizing of postcoloniality?" (Black Women 80).

Nationalism has historically functioned as one of the most powerful weapons for resisting colonialism, and for establishing the space of a postcolonial identity. Although nationalism has nurtured much of the movement toward women emancipation in Asia, Africa, and South America (the "Third World" Feminism was acted out against a background of nationalist struggle aimed at achieving political independence), yet feminism and nationalism have developed an uneasy, if not antagonistic relationship because of the often conflicting nature of their social and political goals. On the one hand, feminism has attempted to empower a community of women that transcends cultural characteristics and geographic boundaries; on the other nationalism has exaggerated such characteristics and boundaries in order to resist hegemonic occupation. Franz Fanon, a celebrated postcolonial theorist has criticized positions such as feminism for their neo-liberal universalism.

Ketu Katrak has argued in "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha,' and the Engendering of National Narratives" that Mahatma Gandhi's resistance to British colonial rule in India during the 1920s and 1930s used specifically gendered representations for the purposes of Indian nationalism, but ultimately did little to free Indian women from their patriarchal subordination to men. He appropriated images of passive women to promote his campaign of passive resistance to British rule. Both men and women were encouraged to adopt a passivity exclusively associated with femininity. She states:

Gandhi's specific representations of women and female sexuality, and his symbolizing from Hindu mythology of selected female figures who embodied a nationalist spirit promoted [...] a 'traditional' ideology wherein female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, domesticity- all forms of controlling women's bodies. (395-6)

Indian nationalism attempted at controlling female bodies by imprisoning them into stereotypes, where female symbolized the pre-colonial, the traditional, and the untouched domestic spaces.

Anne McClintock argues in *Imperial Leather* that African nationalist discourse was a predominantly male-centered tradition in which women's political agency was conceived of in terms of motherhood. Similarly, Kirsten Holst Peterson, in her article "Feminist Approach to African Literature," argues that an important impetus behind the wave of African writing which started in the '60s was the desire to show that the African past was orderly, dignified, and complex, and altogether a worthy heritage in order to fight cultural imperialism. In the course of that, women's issues were not only ignored, but they were also sacrificed in the service of dignifying the past, and restoring African self-confidence. The African past was made the object of a quest. The picture of woman's place and role in these societies had to support this quest, and was consequently lent more dignity and described in positive terms than reality warranted. Peterson criticizes Achebe for contending with the unequal state of affairs, as she states:

Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praise worthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs.(253)

Caribbean male writers, such as Edouard Glissant and Joseph Zobel have also been accused of portraying lifeless, distorted, or stereotypical representations of female protagonists. As Ernest Pépin states:

Women are accorded a large place in Caribbean literature, but this often takes account only of the social role of women. Women such as Fidéline (Zobel), Man Tine (Zobel) and Mycéa (Glissant) do not have bodies.

They embody an abstract or disembodied type. There is still no sculptural representation of the Caribbean woman. It is as if the destiny of her reality engendered as absence of representation. (193).

Nationalist discourses are largely male-centric and control women by capturing them in traditional stereotypes. They are, however, not the only instruments of oppression on the colonized female body. Western feminists, through their representations of colonized women, have also contributed in the oppression of the colonized female body and identity.

Postcolonial feminist theory has always concerned itself with the relationship between White feminist and her indigenous counter-part. In their eagerness to voice the concern of the colonized women, White feminists have overlooked racial, cultural and historical specificities that mark the condition of these women. In so doing, they have imposed White feminist models on colonized women, and thereby, worked as an oppressor. In this section, I analyze two major lacunae, the exclusion of the notion of “race” and the denial of the socio-historical context that characterize the work of Western feminists in their approach toward “Third World” women.

Gayatri Spivak criticizes Gilbert and Gubar’s essay “The Madwoman in the Attic” for ignoring the colonial context of Jane Eyre when celebrating Jane as a proto-feminist heroine and questions the role of Western or “First World” feminists in addressing the concerns of “Third World” women. Spivak argues that Jane’s journey from subservience to female self-determination, economic security and marriage on her terms could not occur without the oppression of Bertha Mason, Rochester’s Creole wife from Jamaica. She points out that Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha in relation to Jane, never as an individual self in her own right. In their words, Bertha is Jane’s “truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self that Jane has been trying to repress” (140). Bertha’s lunacy represents the anger that Jane represses in order to be deemed an acceptable woman in a patriarchal world. This reading of Bertha purely in relation to Jane’s self leaves out the colonial context of Bertha’s imprisonment and fails to examine some of the assumptions concerning Bertha’s lunacy and her representation in terms of “race”.

When Rochester takes Jane to see Bertha, Jane describes seeing a figure “whether beast or human being, one could not tell”. Bertha’s bestiality repeats a frequent assumption in colonial discourses that those born of parents not of the same race are degenerate beings, perhaps not fully human, closer to animals. Bertha’s animalistic characters disqualify her from the journey of human self-determination for which Jane is celebrated by Anglo-American feminist critics.

According to Spivak, Jane’s process of movement from the position of misbegotten orphan to one of legitimacy is a consequence of Bertha’s act of suicide by jumping into fire. Bertha is always connected to Jane as the other; she never achieves any self of her own. Jane’s journey to self-fulfillment and her happy marriage are achieved at the cost of Bertha’s human selfhood and ultimately her life, as Spivak states, “Bertha must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (270). By reading Bertha Masson metaphorically as the repressed side of Jane’s psyche, at most an expression of the “secret self” of the main character, Gilbert and Gubar stand accused of not taking colonialism into account and reproducing the axioms of imperialism. Spivak’s reading of the novel aims at returning it to its colonial context.

In the early 1980s several critics explored the difficulties Black women faced in working with popular feminist discourses. Helen Carby explores these issues in her influential essay “White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood.” In identifying and discussing the condition of “Western feminism” in the 1970s, Carby explains that Black and Asian women are barely made visible within its discourses. And when they are addressed, their representation remains highly problematic. Western feminism is criticized for the Orientalist way in which it represents the social practices of other races as backward and barbarous, from which Black and Asian women need rescuing. In Carby’s view, Western feminism frequently suffers from an ethnocentric bias in presuming that the solutions which White Western women have advocated in combating their oppression are equally applicable to all. As a result, issues of race have been neglected which has hindered feminists from thinking about the ways in which racism and patriarchy interact.

Black feminists have accused Western feminists of reading gender as a monolithic entity, and emphasized the need to consider race and class as issues related to questions of gender. Some critics, such as Sandoval have stressed the need to acknowledge the intellectual and political debt that the White feminist consciousness-raising movement of the 1960s and 1970s owed to the Black Civil Rights movement.

A White Western feminist separatist strategy of aligning with other women and rejecting men did not accord with the concerns of many Black British and African-American feminist theorists who wished to take part in campaigns about racial discrimination with their Black male colleagues. Combahee River Collective (a black feminist group in Boston whose name comes from the guerrilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by women) asserts that for a Black woman the issue of race and sex are not separate from each other. Rape, for example, by White men lead to racial, sexual as well as political oppression. It states:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class and sexual oppression because in our lives they are expressed simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by White men as a weapon of political repression. Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that White women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race. (*The Bridge called my Back* 213)

Arguments about the interlocking nature of race and gender were forcefully made by the Combahee River Collective. The collective also spoke against feminist separatism on the grounds that concentrating on gender oppression alone would never make sense for Black women who always experienced sexual and racial oppression as linked and compounded by each other. Western feminists have not only failed to read gender issues at the cross sections of race and class, they have also ignored the importance of socio-historical and cultural context in examining the condition of "Third World" women. In this regard, their singular reading of harem and veil as instruments of oppression merits an examination.

Harem is perceived by Western feminists as the site of oppression of the colonized Muslim women. Fatima Mernissi argues that there is an ideological divide in Muslim society between the public world of the umma, coded as male and secluded world of the home and harem, coded as female and familial. This separation is preserved by the veil which allows women to pass through the spaces of the public without losing the security of seclusion. Islam differs from the West in seeing female sexuality as dangerously active (rather than as intrinsically passive) and thus as something in need of control.

Sarah Graham-Brown, conversely, argues that the imprisoning harem was in fact the site of female society, structured by its own internal hierarchies and permeated by visitors and workers as well by journeys out by its inhabitants. This vision of the harem as the social space of the household inhabited by women and children is at odds with the Western fixation on it as brothel-like sexual prison that animated so much cultural production in the last two centuries. While Mernissi conceives the umma as a public realm contrasted to the private of the home and harem, others extend this to argue that the network of relations inside and between harems constitutes another public in which women could play important roles as cultural producers and consumers for a female public that was, of course, invisible to most Western and all male observers.

Meyda Yegenoglu, another critic takes a psychological approach to the veil arguing that the veil-symbolizing the truth of the ultimately different Orient is essential to the construction of the European colonial subject. She also explores how the experience of the veil and its various usages as a barrier and a mode of revelation can testify to the agency of resisting colonized subjects. She analyses the way in which the Algerian nationalist women changed tactics once the French realized they were carrying arms under their veils. Selectively unveiling, they were able to move past French soldiers. Disrupting rather than simply reversing the logic of Orientalist binaries the colonized Algerian women veiled, unveiled and revealed to bewildering effect. In Egypt in the 1970s young college educated women took the veil as part of Islamic revivalism. Hence, to look for a singular meaning of the veil would be an error of Orientalist proportions, as its meanings are not monolithic, but nuanced by differences of class, religion and politics.

Chandra Mohanty in her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" criticizes hegemonic Western scholarship and colonialism in Western feminist scholarship in particular. In a number of Western radical and liberal feminist writings Mohanty detects the so-called "colonialist move" which consists of producing the "Third World" woman as a singular and monolithic subject.

This constitution of a colonial Other in these White Western feminist texts on women in the Third World is, according to Mohanty, due to three analytical presuppositions in these texts. First is the assumption of the category of “‘Third World’ women as a coherent group with identical interests, experiences, and goals prior to their entry in the socio-political and historical field” (121). This Western feminist discourse defines Third World women as subjects “outside” social relations instead of looking at the way these women are constituted through these social structures. Economic, religious and familial structures are judged by Western standards; the “typical” Third World woman is thus being defined as religious, family-oriented, legal minors, illiterate and domestic. Through this production of a Third World Other, White Western feminists are discursively representing themselves as being sexually liberated, free-minded, in control of their own lives.

Secondly, the model of power which these Western feminist writings imply, namely the humanist, classical notion of men as oppressors and women as oppressed is taken up by these White scholars. This concept is definitely not adequate, says Mohanty, as it implies a universal notion of patriarchy and thus only stresses the binary “men versus women”. Furthermore, in not taking into account the various socio-political contexts, women are “robbed” of their historical and political agency. She pleads for a politics of location and a more Foucauldian model of power, so that the colonialist move made by some Western feminist scholars can be made explicit as being a discursive institution, and “Third World” women, placed in their own particular historical and political contexts, now can have moments of empowerment with this “diverse, heterogeneous sort of subjectivity”. In this way, Mohanty is deconstructing the idea of “First World woman as subject” versus the “Third World woman as object” which eventually leads to an opening up of theoretical space to talk about differences among Third World women, and women in general.

Thirdly, Mohanty criticizes Western methodological practices which are over-simplified and are in fact just trying to find “proof” of various cases of powerless women in order to support the above mentioned classical notion of Third World women as powerless victims. The White feminist concept of “sisterhood” is therefore also criticized by Mohanty, as it implies a false sense of common experiences and goals; as if all women are oppressed by a monolithic, conspiring sort of patriarchal dominance. This idea certainly cannot be fruitful, says Mohanty, as it only paralyzes women. Mohanty not only exposes the weakness in Western feminism, but also goes a step further to offer some solutions to these lacunae that plague Western feminist’s representation of “Third World” women. Mohanty tries to show the space between the Third World Woman as representation versus real life (third world) women. Careful studies that take into account historical and socio-political backgrounds of different and diverse third world women will help to empower them. The idea of a politics of location, or “situatedness”, is very important with Mohanty. Consequently, she wants to do away with the too simple model of power which consists of the dichotomy “oppressors (who have something) versus oppressed (who lack something)”. By criticizing the White Western feminist scholarship, Mohanty is in fact deconstructing the binary “first world woman versus third world woman” and the binary “men as oppressors versus women as victims”.

The dismissal of First World feminism at a stroke because of the problems discussed earlier in this article might risk losing its resources which can contribute to feminist critique. Hence, one needs to think of the possibility of building new, vigilant relations between women across “First” and “Third World” feminism, as is evidenced by a book edited by Susheila Nasta entitled *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Nasta states that a creative dialogue is possible where First world and Third world voices both contribute and learn from each other. Nasta also acknowledges the problems with the use of English as father tongue that remains problematic for these women, as it houses both colonial and patriarchal values. She, however, reminds us that we must attend to ways in which women can transform the colonizer’s language in order to enable new kinds of representations through which they can speak.

This article examines the two major struggles that define postcolonial feminist theory, and distinguish it from postcolonial theory. Firstly, it explores “Third World” feminists’ resistance against their misrepresentation in the nationalist discourses that imprison their bodies in traditional stereotypes. Second, it analyzes the role of Western feminists in the oppression of Third World women by overlooking questions of race, sex, class, and ignoring the social, historical and cultural contexts while voicing the concerns of colonized women. By way of solution to these issues, Third world women do not intend to do away with Western feminism altogether, but aspire to a representation that attempts to insert them back into their historical and cultural context.

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