Key Issues in Postcolonial Feminism: A Western Perspective

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Abstract:
Third world women are making their voices heard and are beginning to change the face of feminism in the West. Postcolonial feminism in the new millennium now accepts a crucial point, long self-evident to Third World women, that racism, colonialism and its legacies are not just the province of non-white, non-Western women. Prof. Weedon's essay also deals with the concept of difference within gender theory as highlighted by the increasing contribution of Postcolonial studies to gender issues.

1 In 1984 Black American feminist Barbara Smith spoke warmly of being part of a Third World feminist movement: 'And not only am I talking about my sisters here in the United States-American Indian, Latina, Asian American, Arab American-I am also talking about women all over the globe. . . Third World feminism has enriched not just the women it applies to, but also political practice in general' (Smith 1984: 27). The struggle of Third World women-both in the West and in the developing world-for recognition by Western feminism has been long and hard. More often the silenced objects of Western analysis, Third World women are making their voices heard and are beginning to change the face of feminism in the West. Postcolonial feminism in the new millennium now accepts a crucial point, long self-evident to Third World women, that racism, colonialism and its legacies are not just the province of non-white, non-Western women.

2 The history of the West is, in large part, the history of its exploitation of its non-white, non-Western Others. Colonized countries have been profoundly affected by the exploitative, racist nature of this interrelation which was and remains economic, political and cultural. As current debates on the slave trade and the question of reparations illustrate, history is always with us. Although the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished in the course of the Nineteenth Century, its legacies and those of colonial occupation can be seen in the inequalities and political and economic problems of formerly colonized countries. The question of responsibility for the past and what this means for the present was a constant theme at the United Nations global conference on racism held in South Africa in September 2001 and nowhere has this question demanded more attention in recent years than in Australia. Here Aboriginal people's struggle for recognition of their history since white settlement forms an integral part of the broader fight for human rights and equality and Aboriginal women are active in this fight, while at the same time urging white feminists to take these issues seriously (see, for example, Huggins 1998 and Morton-Robinson 2000). In Europe and North America,

the economic and political legacies of colonialism have radically changed the 'racial' and ethnic make up of societies, bringing with them problems of white ethnocentrism, ethnic conflict and racism that feminists must address.

3 As in the colonial period, the legacies of colonialism are invariably tied up with racism. In her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1981), Toni Morrison graphically depicts the effects of the legacy of nineteenth-century classical racism for poor black people in the United States. The novel tells of how the daughter of a poor black family, Pecola Breedlove, internalizes white standards of beauty to the point where she goes mad. Her fervent wish for blue eyes comes to stand for her wish to escape the poor, unloving, racist environment in which she lives. For a long time mainstream white Western feminism paid scant attention to the question of race. Racism was seen as secondary to patriarchy and, at best, the problem of non-white women. Many white women took a liberal, colour blind position which claimed not to see difference or act upon it. It took a long, hard struggle by black women to have racism included on the feminist agenda. One of the most poignant and powerful critiques of white complacency came in 1980 from the radical black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde: 'By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist' (Lorde 1984a: 116). The strong tendency of white women to disregard racism was an effect of white privilege-a point that women of colour were forced to make repeatedly:

> As Third World women we clearly have a different relationship to racism than white women, but all of us are born into an environment where racism exists. Racism affects all of our lives, but it is only white women who can 'afford' to remain oblivious to these effects. The rest of us have had it breathing or bleeding down our necks. (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981: 62)

4 In recent years the question of whiteness has come to the fore in feminist debates on race and remains a key issue in postcolonial feminism (see, for example, Mohanram 1999). This is largely due to the impact of Black feminism on white feminists. Recognising the racialised nature of whiteness and the privilege that comes with it have proved difficult for white women, provoking responses such as disabling guilt rather than positive strategies that would involve relinquishing privilege. Because racism is so ingrained in Western societies-often taking non-conscious and institutionalised forms-anti-racist strategies require a working through, at an individual and personal level, of often unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices and practices. It means coming to terms with the contradictory nature of subjectivity, including individual women's often hidden complicity with oppression or

perpetuation of oppressive practices, As Cherríe Moraga argues:

> Within the women's movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word 'oppression' has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women's fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma. (Moraga 1981b: 30)

5 As Lorde suggested in her essay 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' (1984a), the positive recognition of difference and diversity, so necessary to political advance, requires willingness to acknowledge the privileges which come from the structural power relations within which individuals are located. Gloria Anzaldúa explains the dangers of failing to acknowledge differences in relation to racialised positions:

> Often white-feminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of 'differences', want to blur racial difference, want to smooth things out-they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity. Yet in their eager attempt to highlight similarities, they create or accentuate 'other' differences such as class. These unacknowledged or unarticulated differences further widen the gap between white and colored. (Anzaldúa 1990a: xxi)

6 The tendency to downplay differences has long been part of mainstream feminism. Indeed much advance in the position of women in the West rested on discourses of sameness and human rights. From its inception in the early 1700s, feminism in the modern West has consistently held universalist aspirations and feminists have argued for women's rights as human beings. In radical feminism since the early 1970s, women as a group, sharing fundamental oppressions produced by global patriarchy, have been the basis on which feminists have sought to ground political action (though, here too, there has been increasing attention paid to differences between women over recent years (see, for example, Bell & Klein 1996). The emphasizing of a common shared humanity remains a crucial political strategy within feminism and a movement which began by representing the interests of white, Western, middle-class, women has diversified to the point where human rights have been placed at the centre of the agenda for a global feminism. Reporting in *Signs* on the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, Charlotte Bunch and Susana Fried recount how the conference:

> established clearly that women are a global force for the twenty-first century and that women's human rights are central to women's leadership for the future. Women's rights as human rights permeated debates and delegates speeches at the official UN

> intergovernmental conference as well as at the parallel Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum held some thirty miles away in Huairon, where it was a palpable presence in many sessions. The combined effect of these activities was a groundswell of support for making the entire platform (for Action) an affirmation of the human rights of women, including women's rights to education, health, and freedom from violence, as well as to the exercise of citizenship in all its manifestations. (Bunch and Fried 1996: 200)

7 While the political importance of discourses of human rights and equality remains compelling, any adequate discourse of human rights must remain vigilant about its own partiality and limitations. Discourses of human rights for a long time excluded any one who was not white, male and middle class and affirmed particular meanings and values as universal. Excluded groups have had to fight for centuries for inclusion within the liberal humanist project of liberty and equality. The history of contemporary feminism has made clear how important it is to pay attention to difference even in the interests of achieving rights for all. This is a key theme, too, in recent Third World feminist writing which both challenges the Eurocentric gaze and urges the value of Third World feminist perspectives to a global feminism.

8 In acknowledging and acting upon differences that are hierarchically structured through racialised relations of power, white women need to avoid alienating and marginalising other women by objectifying them or speaking for them. This is particularly important where colonial relations are involved. Moraga argues, for example, that:

> Some white people who take up multicultural and cultural plurality issues mean well but often they push to the fringes once more the very cultures and ethnic groups about whom they want to disseminate knowledge. For example, the white writing about Native peoples or cultures displaces the Native writer and often appropriates the culture instead of proliferating information about it. The difference between appropriation and proliferation is that the first steals and harms; the second helps heal breaches of knowledge. (Moraga 1981a: xxi)

9 The project of postcolonial feminism encompasses women in both the developing and developed world. Whereas the Eurocentric tendencies of women in the West lead them to see their societies and cultures as models for the rest of the world, Third World countries have their own active indigenous women's movements concerned with the specificities of their countries. Much of the feminist theory and scholarship produced by Third World women remains invisible in the West, though some feminists from the Third World who live in the West are increasingly making their voices heard. In addition to analysing their own situations, Third World women are articulating powerful critiques of the Eurocentrism of much Western feminism, its amnesia about colonial history and its tendency to reproduce colonial modes of

representation.

10 A knowledge of history is important to acknowledging and confronting Eurocentrism. To be without this knowledge is to be without the tools with which to understand how the present has been formed by the past. The development of a feminism which can take due account of the structural relations that constitute difference, must recognize the often brutal history of colonialism and its role in shaping the modern world. As Uma Narayan argues:

> Colonial history is the terrain where the project of 'Western' culture's self-definition became a project heavily dependent upon its 'difference' from its 'Others' both internal and external. The contemporary self-definition of many Third-World cultures and communities are also in profound ways political responses to this history. Working t ogether to develop a rich feminist account of this history that divides and connects us might well provide Western and Third-World feminists [with] some difficult but interesting common ground, and be a project that is crucial and central to any truly 'international' feminist politics. (Narayan 1997: 80)

11 Post-colonial feminists are still in the process of contesting the Eurocentric gaze that privileges Western notions of liberation and progress and portrays Third World women primarily as victims of ignorance and restrictive cultures and religions. This was a key focus of Chandra Mohanty's influential essay 'Under Western Eyes' (1991) which argues that much Western feminist writing about Third World women 'discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular "third world woman"-an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse' (Mohanty 1991: 53). Mohanty points out how Third World women tend to be depicted as victims of male control and of traditional cultures. In these characterizations little attention is paid to history and difference. Rather Western feminism comes to function as the norm against which the Third World is judged. If Third World women's issues are analysed in detail within the precise social relations in which they occur, then more complex pictures emerge. Mohanty argues that Third World women, like Western women, are produced as subjects in historically and culturally specific ways by the societies in which they live and act as agents. Moreover they have both voice and agency. Writing of genital mutilation in the Sudan, Evelyne Accad, for example, explains how:

> Women who have been subjected to circumcision or who had witnessed the worst form of excision-infibulation-done on relatives or friends, not only voiced their opinion against it, but they are involved in a wide campaign and actions aimed at struggling to eradicate the practice. The struggle they described to me seemed quite remarkable. They go to the countryside with programs of hygiene and development. They explain the connection between diseases and infibulation which the people have no effort in making. They stage plays and have radio programs to teach the people

> about the disastrous consequences linked to the practice, and they also educate the midwives and lead them to other means of earning a living than performing these operations. (Accad 1996: 468)

This is a very different picture of Third World women's relation to genital mutilation than that found in the work of Western feminists, for example, Mary Daly's classic radical feminist text *Gyn/Ecology* (1979).

12 Uma Narayan (1997) makes similar points about colonial modes of representation in her critique of Daly's treatment of *sati*. Narayan argues that while Daly's work addresses Third World women's issues, 'it does so in a manner that misrepresents what is at stake' reproducing 'some common and problematic Western understandings of Third-World contexts and communities' (Narayan 1997: 45). In Narayan's view Daly fails to give due attention to social and historical details and to context. There is no attention to history in her work on Third World practices and, as a result of this, the Third World emerges as timeless and unchanging. Comparing Daly's accounts of sati and her account of European witch burning, Narayan points to the absence of historical information provided on *sati*. Moreover, Narayan argues, Daly pays no attention to questions of class, caste, religion or geographical location. The picture produced is too simple and monolithic, lacking internal differences and complexity.

13 Another key question in postcolonial feminism is who speaks for whom and whose voices are heard in discussions of Third World women's issues. The lack of voice given to Third World women remains a problem as does the failure of Western women to problematise the role of the West in the issues discussed. The question of voice was raised by Gayatri Spivak in her influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) in which she analyses 'the relations between the discourses of the West and the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern woman' (Spivak 1988: 271).

> Reporting on, or better still, participating in, antisexist work among women of color or women in class oppression in the First World or the Third World is undeniably on the agenda. We should also welcome all the information retrieval in these silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology. Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist-subject constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever. (Spivak 1988: 295)

Although Spivak is profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of giving voice to the subaltern woman, she argues that Western women can do better. It is crucial, she suggests, not to make the commonplace mistake of assuming transparent objectivity on the part of the

researcher. Feminists need to engage with their subjects: 'In learning to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual sytematically unlearns female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized' (295).

14 Difference as inequality is produced by economic, political, social and cultural factors. In the global context these include the division of the world into radically different economic zones characterised by extremes of wealth and poverty. Yet these relations of inequality are often reproduced within developed societies where non-white women most often find themselves at the bottom of the pile. Factors which produce difference as oppression include class, ethnocentric and racist practices, and heterosexism. Islamophobia, for example, is a real threat in Western Europe and the United States. The position in which women are located within any society often determines what they see as political problems. A key question for postcolonial feminism is how to go beyond the limitations that come from one's location in a particular place at a particular moment in history and the experience derived from this. This transcending of ethnocentrism requires effort-the effort to listen to others, to learn about the histories of other women and the social and cultural conditions within which they are placed. It requires what bell hooks calls 'strategies of communication and inclusion that allow for the successful enactment of this feminist vision', that is a vision that takes diversity seriously (hooks 1989: 24). For Western feminists it requires above all, reading and listening to what Third World women have to say.

15 In the Third World, indigenous feminist movements face their own political problems. Yet here too, the effects of Western discourses play a role. The tendency of Western feminism to see itself as feminism *per se*, and not to give due regard to indigenous movements is not unrelated to the tendency of those hostile to feminist movements in the Third World to characterize feminism as by definition Western. Writing of Indian feminism, Narayan shows how anti-feminist forces in India use the notion of Westernisation selectively to attack those aspects of modern Indian life and politics with which they disagree. Far from being an imitation of Western feminism, Narayan argues, Third World feminism is very much a response to local issues in Third World countries:

> Issues that feminist groups in India have politically engaged with include problems of dowry-murder and dowry-related harassment of women; police rape of women in custody; issues relating to women's poverty, health and reproduction; and issue of ecology and communalism that affect women's lives. Indian feminist political activities clearly make feminists and feminism part of the *national political landscape* of many Third-World countries. I am arguing that Third-World feminism is not a

> mindless mimicking of 'Western' agendas' in one clear and simple sense-that, for instance, Indian feminism is clearly a response to issues specifically confronting many Indian women. (Narayan 1997: 13)

In Narayan's view, Third World feminists need to challenge 'the larger pictures of Nation, National History, and Cultural Traditions . . . that conceal their own historicity and their own status as representations-suggesting that the nation and its culture are "natural givens" rather than the historical inventions and constructions that they are'(20-1). This important point is equally applicable to Western nations and, if taken seriously, might make a real contribution to understanding and contesting Western racism and ethnocentism.

16 Thinking difference in new, non-oppressive ways is a key objective of postcolonial feminism, both in the West and in the Third World. This is linked to the political project of creating a global climate in which difference can be lived as enriching and valuable rather than as the oppressive effect of hierarchical binary oppositions. Some recent writing by Black and Third World women in the West has argued that the diasporic experience of women of Colour can create the conditions for breaking down traditional binary categories and liberating difference. This deconstruction of traditional binary oppositions is a move which also informs much postmodern culture. If respect for difference is one of the more positive aspirations of postmodernity, the challenging of boundaries is integral to this project. This is a perspective developed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her writing:

> Theorists-of-color are in the process of trying to formulate 'marginal' theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many 'worlds.' We are articulating new positions in these 'in-between,' Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds. In our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and 'blanked-out' realities while critiquing Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and 'blanked-out' realities while critiquing rational, consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous languages while critiquing the 'languages' of the dominant culture. And we simultaneously combat the tokenization and appropriation of our literatures and our writers/artists. (Anzaldúa 1990a: xxvi)

The idea of a cultural hybridity that can challenge existing binary oppositions and hierarchies has become a popular one in postcolonial theory. It is seen by some women of Colour as a profound and empowering effect of diasporic experience. Thus Black British feminist Heidi Safia Mirza writes:

> Cultural hybridity, the fusion of cultures and coming together of difference, the 'border crossing' that marks diasporic survival, signifies change, hope of newness, and space

> for creativity. But in the search for rootedness-a 'place called home'- these women, in the process of self-identification, disidentify with an excluding, racist British colonizing culture. They articulate instead a multi-faceted discontinuous black identity that marks their difference. (Mirza, 1997: 16)

Yet while it is not only Black women who reject excluding, racist, colonizing cultures, white women, who *de facto* benefit from such exclusions, need to be more vocal in contesting them. They need to work to establish new forms of identity and ways of being, that are inclusive and that respect and celebrate difference.

17 One of the strengths of recent feminist thought is the possibilities that it offers for thinking difference differently. Much of this work is indebted to women of Colour in both the Third and First worlds. It has also benefited from the insights of poststructuralist theory and the debates that this theory has produced (for a full discussion of the issues involved see Weedon 1999). While the struggle for equal rights remains an important dimension of feminist politics, it is no longer necessary, as it was in the liberal humanist tradition, to link rights to sameness. Instead of sameness, it is possible to imagine a world in which difference is celebrated and enjoyed, free from the hierarchical structures of class, racial, sexual and gender power. Yet, to move towards such a world continues to require the articulation of marginalised voices and the self-affirmation of oppressed groups as well as the recognition by white, Western, heterosexual, middle class women of their structural privileges:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject-the liberated voice. (hooks 1989: 211)

All postcolonial feminists, wherever they are located, can contribute to making the existing social relations that produce hierarchical difference visible. This work is a fundamental prerequisite for social change and requires the positive recognition of difference in the struggle to redefine its meaning and reshape its material effects. In the words of Audre Lorde:

> The future of our earth may depend on the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation and suspicion. (Lorde 1984: 123)

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