

Third World Women Representation in Western Feminist Discourse: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The Western representation of others and particularly Third World women is not a recent fabrication but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first encounters between Europe and its other. With this in mind, this paper purports to examine the representation/image of the female Other in the Eurocentric feminist narratives as well as to uncover the pitfalls that Western feminist scholars face while attempting-in their so-called mission - to rescue their sisters in the Third world societies. This paper counters the fallacy that has been long held by Western feminists about Third World women as being homogenous and ‘uncivilized other’. Drawing on postcolonial feminist thought, this paper presents a critique of Western feminism vis-à-vis Third World feminism and literary contributions namely, Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak’ theorizations.

Keywords: Chandra Mohanty, feminist western discourse, Gayatri Spivak, orientalism, representation, third world women, western feminism

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Introduction

It is commonly assumed that Arab people in general and Arab women in particular have long been misrepresented and constructed as ‘alien other’ by Western orientalist discourse. The aim behind this construction is to maintain Western supremacy over the ‘other’ in terms of cultural, political and economic levels. Put differently, when we delve back into the history, we will definitely find a consistent record and patterns of Western intervention, manipulation and exploitation of not only the Arab and Muslim population, but also the wide-ranging world population that generally lays under the rubric of ‘immature’ world since the 16th century. In brief, the Western countries were actually highly consistent in carrying out a successful formula for expansion, colonization and influence throughout the globe and not just in the Arab world.

The Western representation of its ‘Other’ in general and Muslims and Arabs in particular is not a recent fabrication, but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Down to the middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West promotes almost the same stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims. Whether the contact took place in the foregone centuries or it has happened recently, the West preserve a persisting conceptualization of the Arabs and Muslims as an alien “Other” or rather ‘Enemy’.

Needless to say that western ideologies and policies have been long concerned to maintain political, economic and cultural power over the Non-western countries to strategically enhance the supremacy of the West over the East. With this in mind, this paper purports to examine the representation/image of the female Other in the Eurocentric feminist narratives as well as to uncover the pitfalls that western feminist scholars face while attempting-in their assumed mission - to rescue their sisters in the Third World societies. This paper counters the fallacy that has been long held by Western feminists about Third World women as being homogenous and ‘uncivilized other’. Drawing on postcolonial feminist thought, this paper presents a critique of western feminism vis-à-vis third world feminism, namely Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak’ theorizations.

2- Towards Orientalism

There is a common consensus among scholars and critics that Edward Said’s (1978) book *Orientalism* is regarded as the cornerstone of postcolonial cultural studies. In general, it was this famous and pioneering book that has, since its publication, inspired and paved the way to the work of numerous theorists and critics of the twentieth century such as Spivak and Bhabha. These critics along with others in postmodern era are highly indebted to Said’s book as it was the basis for their works and theories. Bhabha(1992) states that “Orientalism inaugurated the postcolonial field” ,and Spivak similarly depicts it as “the source book in our discipline” (as cited in Moore-Gilbert,1997, p. 34).

It is generally admitted that the concept ‘orientalism’ refers to the way the West views and construct the East or the Orient with malevolent intentions and attitudes. It is, therefore, a notoriously mode and a way of seeing others which often- if not always- emphasizes, exaggerates

and distorts differences of others and their local cultures as compared to that of Europe, the U.S and the West as a whole. More importantly, this ideology often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. Orientalism can be defined as a discourse that is meant to keep colonized peoples subservient and inferior to colonial rule.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the orientalism is seen as an ideology which is based on the premise to construct a binary division between the West and its 'Other'. Although the geographical line between the West and the East is an imaginary and artificial one, the acceptance of this binarism with the former as privileged and dominant; the latter as unprivileged and inferior is taken for granted by Western scholars and institutions. This is significantly mentioned in Said ground-breaking book *Orientalism*. At this moment, the relationship of the Occident and Orient becomes the relationship of "power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978, p.5). He (1978) also adds "Orientalism must create its own other; because of this other it can strengthen its own identity and superiority and because of this other it can set off against the Orient as "a sort of surrogate and even underground self (p. 3).

In fact, Said's orientalism is a study of how the Western colonial powers of Britain and France represented North African and the Middle Eastern lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In brief, Orientalism refers to the sum of the West's conceptualization and representations of the orient. This process consistently places the West in a superior position and the Orient in an inferior one. Equally important, Said (1978) defines orientalism, in his highly influential work *Orientalism*, as a style of thought based upon an "ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of time) the Occident" (p. 1). He further stresses in the introduction to orientalism that the orient has been fundamental in defining the West as "its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (p. 3). The orient then serves as a mirror to the West in the sense that the West highly needs its other counterpart Orient to justify its own sense of superiority over it .Consequently, the west is civilized only because the orient is uncivilized ...etc. Richard (1994) argues, here, that "the representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer" (p.289).

As stated above, orientalism constructs binary division between the West and its other. That is, each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other. Hence, the orient is conceived as being everything that the West is not, its alter ego. This is, however, not an opposition of equal partners. The orient is frequently described in a series of negative terms that serve to reinforce the sense of the west superiority and domination. If the west is assumed as the seat of knowledge and learning, then it will follow that the orient is the place of ignorance and naiveté. As a result, East and West are positioned through the construction of an equal dichotomy. The west occupies a superior rank while the orient is its other, in a subservient position. This makes the relations between them asymmetrical.

3-Representation of Third World Women Others in Western Feminist Discourse

It goes without saying that third world women in general and Arab women in particular have always been misrepresented by western feminist scholars as being docile, submissive and uneducated women not to say uncivilized. In brief, western feminists have, throughout their writings and studies, depicted third world women as one singular entity and a monolithic group, and by doing so they disregard have intentionally trampled on third world women specificities and their historical backgrounds which basically set them apart from western feminist experiences.

Delving into western feminist texts and discourses, one can easily observe how negatively Third World women are portrayed and represented. Importantly, Western female scholars have constantly claimed to offer help to their sisters in the third world, but yet they have, due to a set of reasons, failed to do so. Precisely put, western feminist so-called attempt to save and help third world women to promote their social status is unsurprisingly characterized and largely marked by numerous shortcomings and limitations which are seen as the heart of this study.

To begin with, it is worth noting that one of the basic reasons beyond western feminist failure to help their sisters, as they have claimed, is the fact that they have approached and theorized third world women from western perspectives and values. By doing so, they have trampled on third world women's own particularities such as religious, cultural and traditional tenets along with neglecting the conceptualization of gender relations, historical and economic, and most importantly the history of colonialism. For many critics, western feminist ideology, through its act and philosophy of representation, it intentionally serves to maintain unequal power structures and relations between West and the East and therefore it ultimately reinforces the supremacy of the West over the East.

In this context, transnational feminists, however, not only have they challenged the universal claim of the Western feminists to speak on behalf of all women, but they have also directed sharp criticism to western feminism for having misrepresented third world women. Postcolonial thinkers and transnational feminists like Mohanty, Rajan, El Saadawi, Andluaze, Kumar, and Spivak to name few, have generated an important rethinking body of post-colonial feminists' thought. That is, the most important idea that transnational feminists have challenged is the Western feminists' underlying assumption that all women are the same without looking at differences that exist in terms of race, class, religion, citizenship and culture of women.

In his book Morton (2007) states:

Alongside feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Nawal El Saadawi and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Spivak has also persistently been critical of western feminism's historical complicity with imperialism and the tendency of some western feminist thinkers to ignore the specific social, cultural and historical circumstances of non-western women's live" (p. 125).

Being one of the most influential figure in contemporary post-colonial theory and transnational feminists, and Marxist feminist, Spivak has made a crucial contribution to feminist thought by criticizing Western feminism ,particularly its universalizing claim to speak for all women ,regardless of difference in class, race, religion, culture, language, and nationality.

In her insightful and prominent essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak(1988) has criticized the feminist discourse for speaking on the behalf of the subaltern in general and third world women in particular. She basically raises, in this widely acclaimed essay, some issues of the Third World Women which have never been invoked in the international platform. For her, Feminism is theory which could not take into consideration the views and aspirations of all the women worldwide with regard to class, ethnicity, religion and culture; this is probably one of its shortcoming for which it is fundamentally blamed and, therefore, it is viewed as Eurocentric ideology which places Western feminist’ interests at the core of its agendas.

Equally important, Spivak’s writings and reflections suggest a persistent challenge to the Western feminism for homogenizing and misrepresenting Third World women instead of allowing them to make their voices and interests heard. For Spivak, all women are not homogenous and monolithic groups as Western feminists avow; rather there are marked differences and specificities existing among women worldwide regarding class, colour, religion, culture and geopolitical conditions. Needless to state that socioeconomic conditions of the European women ,for instance, are incomparable to those women of the Asian Continent. Also, the European women generally seem to enjoy more rights and freedom than their counterpart’s women of the Third World. In this way, it would be very difficult to create a universally agreeable female gender identity without regarding these differences mentioned above.

Spivak(1987) further explores the experiences of Third World Women as being “shadowed by the doctrines of French High Feminism” (p.141). At this juncture, Spivak’s contention is to refute Western feminism namely French feminism as they turned a blind eye to significant differences in history, culture, colour, social class ...etc. In a similar vein, Spivak’s reflections on Western feminism are highly revealed in both her reading and translation of Devi’s short story work entitled “Breast Giver”. Jashoda , the female subaltern protagonist of the story, reverses traditional patriarchal stereotypes by taking on responsibilities allegedly held by men .That is , she becomes the family provider by giving milk to other children after her husband becomes crippled in an accident. By doing so, she challenges Western feminist notion of motherhood as being the source of oppression for Third World women. On the contrary, she sees motherhood as a profession that grants her economic and social independency.

On her comments on Jashoda’s story, Spivak (1987) argues that:

The milk that is produced in one’s own body for one’s own children is a use value. When there is a superfluity of use values, exchanges value arise. That which cannot be used is exchanged. As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda’s milk emerges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept

in prime condition for optimum lactation. The milk she produces for children is presumably through “necessary labour.” The milk that she produces for the children of her master’s family is through “surplus labour” (p.248).

Spivak(1988) further contends that “if in contest of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”(p.287). Spivak examines here the situation of British occupation in India as an example of white European ideology taking over the other cultures and perpetuating the inferiority of the ‘Other’. That is, Third World women are made to be more subject to invisibility and silence than their counterpart males by Western feminist ideologies. Hence, writings about a subaltern group and particularly Third World women from an outsider’s perspective -the Western feminists- can never be an objective process simply because such writings are carried out without experiencing the culture as an insider. Ironically, how can an outsider correctly and objectively write about or accurately express a culture they do not directly experience?

Moreover, Spivak underscores Western feminist political agenda and discourse to marginalize and disempower the Third World ‘subaltern’. Stated differently, she examines the ethics and politics involved in this ‘othering’ process, seizing on the question of representation of the Third World. Focusing , for instance, on ‘sati’ practice ,a widow-sacrifice or ‘widow self-immolation’ that was very common in pre-colonial and colonial India, Spivak rejects and refutes British intervention to obliterate this cultural practice on the basis of ‘civilizing mission’. Ironically enough, Spivak (1988) regards this act as a mode of silencing and disempowering Indian women under the rubric of a so-called ‘civilizing mission’. This is significantly testified in her famous phrase: White men saving brown women from brown men” (p.293).British rulers seemed to ignore the religious and the spiritual significance behind this cultural practice as a noble act displayed willingly by women towards their husbands in the funeral pyre .According to Spivak, the act of ‘self-immolation’ can be by no means considered as an act of suicide but “ it should have been read with martyrdom (p.302).By willingly doing so , they gain too much respect and it is regarded as an indication of a wife’s devotion and love to her husband. Spivak(1988) adds that:

It is in terms of this profound ideology of the displaced place of the female subject that the paradox of free choice comes into play...By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject such a death can be understood by the female subject as an exceptional signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule for a widow’s conduct(p.300).

In the same vein, another transnational feminist, Chandra Mohanty(1984) has refuted western feminist representation of third world women. Crucially, she contends that “Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group with identical interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances” (p.337). Here, Mohanty draws attention to the experiences of Third World women and highlights their heterogeneous nature with regard to diverse cultural, class, ethnic, gender and religious backgrounds. Phrased in different terms, Mohanty further criticizes a tendency in western feminist

scholarship to colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world (p.334).

Mohanty (1984) also adds that:

For in the in the context of a first/third world balance of power, feminist analyses which perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the ‘third – world woman’. Images like the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc. These images exist in universal ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third – world connections (p. 352)

The argument that Chandra Mohanty made in her classic essay highlights the need to be sensitive to the phenomenal divisions between ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ women. Originally written in 1984 ,but subsequently reproduced in different publications, Mohanty(1984) denounces Western feminists assumption of ‘a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group’ which results in creating ‘the image of an “average Third World Woman”’ who ‘leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc)’ (p.337). “This image, Mohanty adds, is constructed ‘in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern”. In other words, Western feminists use ‘Third World’ women as their foil, producing as a result a new layer of colonization, and consequently, ‘rob[bing] them of their historical and political agency’ (Ibid). “Applying the notion of women as homogeneous category to women in the ‘Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks” adds Mohanty. Thus, she calls for ‘careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities (Ibid).

Gloria Anzaldua is another critic that recounts some of the experiences of Third World women trying to show Western feminists that their assumed universalism is not working and they should stop speaking for third world women and on behalf of them. At this juncture, she asserts:

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, and our spirit. The schools we attended or didn’t attend did not give us the skill for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic language (Keating& Gonzalez, 2011p.111).

It can be noted that the idea of neglecting and disregarding the particularities of Third world women is deeply reflected in Western feminist agendas. For Anzaldua, Western ideology perpetuates the subordination and the inferiority of third world women through the philosophy of ignorance and trivializing the cultural legacy and aspects of others in general and Third World women in particular.

3- Conclusion

With regard to the aforementioned factors, it is fair to state that western feminists have failed their so-called mission to help and empower their sisters in the Third World due to the fact that their interference has entailed the application of their western perspectives and values to approach third world women issues and sufferings. This failure, as it has been argued above by many critics, is attributed not only to the fact that western feminists have examined and studied Third World women from the lens of their cultural perspectives, but also to the lack of knowledge and understanding other differences in terms of gender relation, cultural, religious practices, and geopolitical conditions and more importantly the history of colonialism.

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Notes

Sati: Refers to a very common cultural practice in India during which women would willingly immolate themselves by joining the funeral pyre of their dead husband as an act of self-devotion and love. Ancient Hindu religious texts treat 'sati' as a ritual rather than an act of suicide.

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