



## Postcolonial Feminism

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### Abstract

Colonialism/Postcolonialism is an extremely broad so far nearby guide to the historical and hypothetical scope of colonial and postcolonial studies. National fantasies are they colonial, anti-colonial or postcolonial also play upon the connection between woman, land or nation. Feminist theory and postcolonial theory are occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature. Given that both critical projections employ multidisciplinary perspectives, they are each attentive, at least in principle, to historical context and the geopolitical co-ordinates the subject in question. The identification of women as national mother stems from a wider association of nation with the family. The topic of feminism and postcolonialism is integrally tied to the project of literary postcolonialism and its concerns with the critical reading and interpretation of colonial and postcolonial texts.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, representation, politics, literature

### Introduction

It is fair say that beginning postcolonialism is an especially challenging procedure because it is particularly difficult to answer those questions with which we started. Such is the variety of activities often called 'postcolonial' that it is not very easy to find an appropriate point of departure. Although the ideal woman here is constructed in opposition to the spectre of the *memsabib*, the image fuses together older brahminical notions of female self-sacrifice and devotion with the Victorian ideal of the enlightened mother, devoted exclusively to the domestic sphere. Feminist studies and postcolonial studies sometimes find themselves in a mutually investigative and interactive relation with each other, especially when either becomes too narrowly focused, when feminist perspectives are blind to issues pertaining to colonialism and the international division of labour and when postcolonial studies fails to include gender in its analysis. In postcolonial feminism, by contrast—that is, feminism congruent with broad postcolonial perspectives, simultaneously: “postcolonial” and “feminist” in temper and commitment—emphasis tends to be placed on the collusion of patriarchy and colonialism.

### Various Descriptions

Postcolonial feminist criticism is extensive and variable. It analyses range across representations of women in once-colonized countries and in western locations. Some critics have concentrated on the constructions of gender difference during the colonial period, in both colonial and anti-colonial discourses; while others have concerned themselves with the representations of women in postcolonial discourses with particular reference to the work of women writers. At the level of theory, postcolonial feminist critics have raised a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in

the study of representations of gender. These problems are at once specific to feminist concerns, such as the possibility of finding and international, cross- culture sisterhood between ‘*First world*’ and ‘*Third world*’ women, as well as more general problems concerning who has the right to speak for whom, and the relationship between the critic and their object of analysis.

The terms ‘postcolonialism and feminism’, refer that feminism is something which is anterior to postcolonialism. This would be grossly incorrect. It should be clear that feminist work is a constitutive part of the field of postcolonialism, and that issues of gender difference are central to each of the areas explored in the beginning postcolonialism. However, some feminist critics have pointed out that postcolonialism can appear a male-centred field. So the title of this paper partly recognizes that postcolonialism and feminism are sometime seen to share tense relations with each other.

A note on terminology is needed before we look at some of these debates, particularly concerning how to define ‘feminism’ and ‘patriarchy’. As we would expect, it is as challenging to define ‘feminism’ as it is to define ‘postcolonialism’. The variable ranges of work which can be called ‘feminist’ make it difficult to summaries feminism in a sentence. In talking of ‘the struggle for change’, we can understand that feminist reading practices are involved in the contestation of patriarchal authority. The term ‘patriarchy’ refers to those systems political, material and imaginative which invest power in men and marginalize women. Like colonialism, patriarchy manifests itself in both concrete ways and at the level of imagination.

### Feminism in Postcolonialism

In her influential and controversial essay “*Can the Subaltern*

speaking?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recounts the tale of a mysterious suicide: "a young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhubaneswari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy". Spivak confesses in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that contemplation of "this failure of communication" had "so unnerved" her that, in her initial discussions of Bhaduri's suicide she had been let to write, "in the accent of passions lament the subaltern cannot speak!"

A postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention both to the subject and to the medium of representation. It also requires a general critical literacy, that is, the capacity to read the word with a critical eye. Thus Bhaduri's suicide, described by Spivak through the trope of "speaking", function as a letter from past which may be read and interpreted variously by different "readers" with multiple motivations in different rotations and in various times. The etymological links between "literary" and "literacy", streaming from the Latin 'literal' for 'letter', reinforces the idea that communication composes not only the act of "speaking" but also that of reception, listening, and interpretation. It could be argued, in fact, that nearly all the issues central to postcolonial feminism are concerned with the various ways of reading gender: in the world, the word, and the text.

### The 'Double Colonization' of Women

This 'double colonization' affects women from both the colonised and colonising cultures in various ways. In her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient*, Rana Kabbani looks at the production of the Eastern female as a figure of licentiousness, and western heterosexual male desire, in travel, writing and paintings of the 'Oriental' women and the harem. Kabbani shows how the depiction of Eastern women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries objectified them as exotic creature that epitomised and promised the assumed excessive sexual delights of the Orient. She shows how in reading these representations we must be aware of the mutually supportive processes of colonialism and patriarchy which produce Eastern women in eroticised terms. In addition, as Vron Ware explains in her book *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, colonial representations in the Victorian period tended to traffic in iconic representations of white women as epitomizing the West's perceived higher moral and civil standards. Thus, as she explains, 'one of the threats of real or imagined violence towards white women became a symbol of the most dangerous form of insubordination'.

Of course, this does not mean that colonised and colonising women were placed in the same position through their 'double colonization'. Rana Kabbani makes reference to Victorian Western colonial travelers who also depicted the Orient in patriarchal terms. She argues that these women were 'token travelers only, who were forced by various pressures to articulate the values of patriarchy'. Kabbani draws our attention to the presence and complicity of Western women in the colonising mission, and the ways in which they were also subject to the patriarchal imperatives of colonial discourses. In her criticism on *Mary Kingsley's Travel in West Africa*, Pratt

demonstrates that Kingsley's work distance itself from some of the masculinist tropes and narrative set-pieces prevalent in men's writing about Africa during the period through the use of 'irony or inversion'.

### The World Women in the West

In the Rhetoric of English India, Sara Suleri rejects the anxious "collusion between postcolonial and feminist theories, in which each term serves to refer the potential pietism of the other". The production of an idealized marginal subjectivity has occasioned a good deal of critical comment in postcolonial feminist work. "The coupling of postcolonial with women", Suleri reiterates, "Almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebration of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for the good"

### Postcolonial Critiques of 'First World' Feminism

As we shall see, Western or 'First world' feminism has come in for much criticism from postcolonial critics due to the lack of attention paid to the problems suffered by women with links to countries with a history of colonialism. We shall attend to three important issues:

- Feminism and race
- The limits of first world feminism
- Third world women

### Feminism and 'Race'

Helen Carby explores these issues in her influential essay 'White women 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 discourses. Western feminism is criticized for the Orientalist way it represents the social practices for other 'race' as backwards and barbarous, from which black and Asian women need rescuing by their Western sisters. In so doing it fails to take into consideration the particular needs of these women, or consider different cultural practices *on their own terms*. The different meanings made by black and Asian women in their narratives remain unheard.

As a consequence, issues of 'race' have been neglected which has hindered feminists from thinking about the ways in which racism and patriarchy interact. In addition, white women have failed to see themselves as the potential oppressors of black and Asian women, even when adopting benevolent positions towards them.

### Learning the Limits of 'First World' Feminism

Before reading Spivak's work, a word of caution is required. Spivak's writing can, at first, seem sophisticated to the point of impenetrability. She works closely with the insights of poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and her own writing displays much of the slipperiness with language associated with their deconstructive texts. This is not merely for appearance's sake. Spivak reflects on her own Western education as an upper-class woman from Calcutta who studied French avant-garde philosophy in America. It is important to notice that Spivak's argument avoids the charge of *ethnocentrism* by refusing the logical that, for example; only Indian women can speak for other

Indian women. It is very difficult to assume that the critic can ever speak 'on behalf' of anybody, because the position of both the critic and their 'object' is never securely fixed.

### **'Third World' Women**

As we noted earlier, 'First world' feminism and 'Third world' women are in adequate phrases which traffic in untenable generalizations and ring-fence internally various voices. Mohanty argues that Western feminism cannot escape implication in these global economic and political frameworks and must be careful not to replicate unequal power relations between the 'First world' and 'Third world'. Yet Western feminism is in danger of doing this in its analysis of 'Third world' women.

### **'Going a piece of the way': Creative Dialogues in Postcolonial Feminism**

Of course, not all critics have subscribed to Spivak's view and have found problems with her argument. This is sometimes as a result of misconceptions that exist concerning the finer points of her argument- although, for some, Spivak's complex and adventurous style must shoulder some responsibility for this. One of the shrewdest readers of Spivak's is Bart Moore-Gilbert who, in his book *postcolonial theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, makes the important point that 'the more the subaltern is seen as a "theoretical" fiction... the more the suffering and exploitation of the subaltern becomes a theoretical fiction too. In other words, by regarding the subaltern as an effect of discourse and not an actual individual, Spivak's treats material realities as purely textual or theoretical phenomena.

Carole Boyce Davies makes a valuable point in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* when she uses the phrase 'going a piece of the way with them' to explain her own encounters with Western theory. None the less, existing schools of thought can be engaged in a process of negotiation which yields useful critical tools. Davies proposes 'a kind of *critical relationality* in which various theoretical positions are interrogated for their specific applicability to Black women's experiences'.

### **Conclusion**

If the nation is an imagined community, that imagined is profoundly gendered. We have already discussed how gender and sexuality are central to the conceptualization, expression and enactment of colonial relations. The writing of women who worked alongside, within or in opposition to the nationalist and anti-colonial movements are increasingly becoming available for feminist scholars. We can usefully turn to debates in feminist theory and historiography where the question of recovering women's consciousness has been fraught with similar problems. A feminist position within postcolonialism must confront the dilemma of seeming divisive while the projects of decolonization and nation-building are still under way. Outside postcolonial studies, with in the broader frame work of mainstream feminism, postcolonial perspectives that focus on race and ethnicity may be perceived as forces that fragment the global feminist alliance. Differences between postcolonial feminist theorists surface repeatedly as the category of "women of color" is fractured by the politics of location, strife between minority

communities in the first world, women in diasporic communities, and women in the third world.

### **Reference**

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