

Revising Imperialist Assumptions of Western Feminism: A Postcolonial Analysis

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Abstract

This paper attempts to delineate the effects and problematics of hegemonic claims of feminist scholarship on the subject of exploration in the formulated category- the Third World. The analyses of the popular hegemonic discursive practice have become a crucial aspect of the post-colonial studies criticism as now the derivation of the word 'coloniality' is extended to the specific cultural, ideological, and social practices. The discursive politics and historicization of western feminist writings have led to the production of a particular cultural discourse; creating an average image called the 'Third World Women'. The paper will analyse the politics of 're-presentation' within the context of feminist writings, and how such discursive practices create a structural conflict for women in this binary construction of the Third world and the West.

Keywords: Coloniality; Discourse; Postcolonial; Third world; Women.

The situation and derivation of the word 'coloniality' has always been a concern in post-colonial studies. The earlier conception of coloniality was based on direct territorial utilisation and control. Here, the space is explored via geographical violence and is further brought under colonial control for economic gains and political dominance. There is clear demarcation and reflection of the economic (commercial) and the political geography that is colonised. Said in *Culture and Imperialism* uses the term, "'imperialism', to mean the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory: 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on the distant territory" (8). However, the modern European forms of imperialism function and base their domination whether cultural, political or economic more indirectly than the earlier forms of transoceanic dominations. One such is through the hegemonic utilisation

of the discursive practice. Said's idea of Orientalism is an important frame in understanding the nature and context of the modern European form of imperialism. According to Said, "In our times, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, cultural, and social practices" (8). Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her feminist undertaking also posits a similar question of what derives coloniality in the post-colonial world? Is it circumscribed within the borders of national interests or is it transnational in the sense of the neo-imperialism working in the globalised world?

Rumina Sethi in her work *The Politics of Postcolonialism* states that significantly the inclusion of the cultural effects of colonialism within post-colonial studies becomes apparent by the late 1970s when 'post' begins to signify more than simply the historic passage of time. This coincides with the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which dealt with issues of colonial representation and cultural stereotyping (Sethi 3). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that the third world concerns are usually reflected in the frame of coloniality, that is within the terms of earlier forms of territorial colonisation and exploitation. Though many of the nations and the geographical areas were under this process of territorial subjugation or colonisation, hence an important factor in the formulation of the identity of a nation and its subjects.

On the other side, the analyses of the popular hegemonic discursive practice have become a crucial aspect of post-colonial studies criticism. Discursive practices and politics here are used in relation to the idea of 'discourse', primarily coined by Michele Foucault, a term that denotes "a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning" (Adams). In *Orientalism*, Said discusses how German Orientalism did not have any direct colonial interest mainly in South Asia and the Middle East, yet in its discursive frame and model, it resembled Anglo-French Orientalism. Thus, irrespective of the process of direct colonisation, a certain intellectual authority was assumed in structuring certain views and thoughts on the formulated subject of the Orient. According to Said, Orientalism as a discourse can be discussed and analysed "as the corporate institution dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, *Orientalism* 11).

Conscious or unconscious of the literary and historical discursive trends,

such discursive politics and historicization not only create biased imagery but also reinforces the pre-existing stereotypes about the world rendered as the Orient in the Western discourse. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her work "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1986) utilises the same frame in arguing against the western feminist discursive practice concerning women in the third world. She also argues over the fact that "the term colonization has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist writings.... To its use by feminist women of colour in the U.S to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women movement and their discourses" (Mohanty 333). Like Said, she moves forward from the economic and political dominant practices to more discursive politics, which in the case of the former is the production of the 'Orient', and in Mohanty's line of argument, it is the "production of a particular cultural discourse what is called the 'Third World'" (333). In both these postcolonial cultural and feminist criticism, the discursive practices and politics are premised on exteriority which fails to render the 'real subject' in the formulated 'other world'. The relational structure of self and other is established. Hence, the problem lies in understanding and delineating the subject of exploration within this frame of structural relation that constitutes a structural dominance.

The term 'colonization' in the essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" is used by Mohanty in a discursive sense on the monolithic formulation of the subject of the third world in the western feminist scholarship. The essay problematizes the appropriation of the experiences of women in the third world. Mohanty in her analysis of the feminist scholarship within the frame of colonial discursive practices focuses on the "analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject which take their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the U.S and Western Europe" (Mohanty 334). The idea of universalising the identical interest and desires within the feminist criticism is as problematic as is the homogenising of the women in the third world under one rubric.

This argument in the literary feminist trend has been already pointed out in the earlier stages of feminist criticism, such as in the early critical writings of Elaine Showalter. Showalter in *A Literature of their Own* defines female literary tradition as a subculture in relation to the mainstream. She states, "I attempted to define women's writing as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream. In its evolution, I argued, women's writing moves in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and val-

ues of women within the family and the community” (Showalter 403). Here, her work may suggest that this subculture is all-inclusive and represents the experiences of women universally. But, if femininity is a social construct then it must vary with cultures because different cultures have different values and different practices. Thus, women’s experiences vary from culture to culture and a single so-called subculture cannot represent them all. In fact, there may be subcultures within female literary traditions instead of it being a subculture in itself. The title *A Literature of Their Own* could in itself be interpreted as the acknowledgement of the notion of cultural difference. As Showalter herself writes in the title ‘their’ rather than ‘our’, it emphasized her own cultural distance, as an American, from the English women she discussed” (404), here she is adhering to the idea of the cultural difference. Hence, an all-inclusive umbrella concept claiming to represent women across cultures is fallacious.

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” While problematizing the politics of representation Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues against the location of an undivided universalised subject in the western scholarship. She takes up the discussion between the intellectuals Deleuze and Foucault within the discursive paradigm of power, desire and interest. The discussion focuses on the two contested subjects, ‘A Maoist’ and ‘the workers struggle’ both of whose proper names are rendered transparently in various other struggles and contexts around the globe. Spivak argues that “Deleuze’s reference to the workers’ struggle is problematic; it is obviously a genuflection: ‘We are unable to touch [power in any point of its application without finding ourselves confronted by the diffuse mass so that we are necessarily led... to the desire it up completely. The apparent banality signals a disavowal. The statement ignores the international division of labour” (Spivak 67). The problem lies in its dealing with the mechanisms of global capitalism. It also does not take into account the presence of ‘Para capitalist labour’, the agro-based structural heterogeneity in the ‘periphery’. Spivak argues upon the problems inherent in such predisposition, like, “ignoring the international division of labour: rendering ‘Asia’ transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the ‘Third World’): re-establishing the legal subject of socialized capital” (67).

Mohanty, likewise, argues upon the model of power and struggle which homogenised the notion of oppression and subjugation within the monolithic system of patriarchy. She criticises the western scholarship model of universals and cross-cultural validation that leads to the production of an overarching composite image of the women in the third world. Her essay is critical of the analytic strategies employed in the discourse on the

third world women that lead to the blurring of the distinction between the relationship of 'Women', "a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representative discourses", and 'women' as the real material subjects of their collective histories" (Mohanty 334). It distorts the heterogeneity of the experiences, histories, and materiality of the 'women' in the third world. Hence, producing a similar model like that of the unified composite 'Orient' within the discourse of Orientalism that Said critically analyses. Likewise, in the feminist discourse such uncritical discursive and political practices produce a composite monolith of the 'Third World Woman'.

For her analysis, Mohanty takes up the "Women in the Third World " series published by Zed Press. Most of the writings in the series assume the western authorial subject in the feminist discourse and scholarship as the central referent for the overarching concerns of the women in the third world. In the series, writers like Maria Rosa Cutrufelli in her work *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression* link the shared structure of economic dependencies of the 'African' women and the profession of prostitution as the sheer source of income among the women population. Juliette Minces in *Veiled: Women in Islam* fails to render the complexity of the 'veiling' as a practice situated at different historical junctures and cultural contexts. Situating the practice within the frame of subjugation and oppressed realities devoid of the existence of the women for whom it is a sign of their solidarity, assertion of their identity, and their own religious conviction. It then acts as an impediment in the reformist struggle of those very women. Also, in rendering the status and practices of women within the Islamic society the complexity of class and cultural differences cannot be negated. In both cases, the homogeneity derived from such sociological grouping is problematic.

In this sameness of oppression and concerns the specificity and the contextual bound experiences of the subject at various historical junctures get negated. It becomes problematic to understand the working of power and oppression at the core level of a particular society in order to understand it and at the same time to resist and reform those societal norms. The monolithic theorizing of male violence and patriarchy renders a dual model of the oppressor and the oppressed in society. "The totalization that Mohanty criticises forms a dual system that traps people in the Third World in two uniform groups" (Mohammadi). Thus, the rendering of the subject in either way becomes problematic as it binds both the subject and the context of theorizing the subject within this dual model. The 'woman' as a subject either can be situated in the oppressed position or in the stand

of the oppressor if she resists the oppression and reclaims her identity. Ironically, this hinders the larger vision and scope of feminist struggle and discourse. The discursive political practices and analytic strategies such as Mohanty analyses in her essay bind the women in the third world within the frame of powerlessness, as being victims to the identical shared socio-economic and political structure.

Said Orientalism works very much in the historical moment of 'structuralism' that primarily concerns the binary opposition (Fry). Orientalism as a discourse constructs a binary between the Orient and the Occident. Said in his work analyses the interdependence of the structural relation that marks the formulation of the decentred other and the central self, "including the way in which the construction of otherness of other is at the same time a means of constructing, defining, delimiting the nature of selfhood- of being western" (Fry). And this 'other' in the dual is rendered as ahistorical, 'exotic', and timeless, thus, demeaning the subject of the study. In this process of cultural appropriation, the 'cultural other' is literary or artistically translated into the realm of the familiar. This translation is further marketed to the western audience and readers. "For Said, Exoticism functions in a variety of imperial contexts as a mechanism of aesthetic substitution which replaces the impress of power with the blandishment of curiosity" (Huggan 14).

Mohanty's essay deals with the similar binaries that are the creation of selfhood of western feminism within the structural relationships in which the women in the third world are rendered as the 'inferior sisters'. Hence, it produces an average image of the third world women within certain stereotypes, such as being 'traditional', less educated, the veiled women, underdeveloped, and resigned to the domestic sphere. And, in the opposite frame are the modern, educated, liberal subjects of western women. It further leads to the formation of a paternalistic attitude known as the 'third-world difference'. This means of construction occurs due to the fact of the western feminist scholarship's assumption of its own centrality as the referent in the discursive study of women in different parts of the world. However, this structural dominance and construction in the arena of representation are not only problematic for the women in the third world, but also for the women in the west. In the context of both the 'Orient' and the 'Third-World Women' this structural model of the neo-imperial discursive practices is premised on exteriority, "it makes the orient and the 'third world subject' speaks, discredits them, renders its mystery and plane for and to the west. Thus, on the one hand, the 'real' subject of its own material experiences and history loses its authenticity in

the politics of 're-presentation'. On the other side, this practice of the delineation of the centrality of western selfhood also delimits its own scope and horizon of problems that prevail in the west. In Foucauldian terms, "exteriority, is the depression, the systematic dissociation, of the unified truth of interiority" (Said, "Abecedarium Culturae" 313).

The overarching model of development that the third world must look at is itself challenged by ecofeminists, Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive*, by Gabriel Marquez in his literary works, such as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Vandana Shiva's "Women in Nature" problematizes the general conception of the categories of male and female within Indian cosmology. The categories do not correspond to the western categorisation of rigidly demarcated gender association and attribution. The understanding of the aspect of male and female principles is distinct within the Indian cosmological context. The two principles work in a complementary relationship within human beings for the creation and sustainment of life. "Every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity within a unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles and between nature and man becomes the basis of ecological thought and action in India" (Shiva 39).

The generalised notion of male violence, the singular patriarch system, or the sameness of women's experiences needs to be contested within the particular socio-cultural and historic ground. Even the whole concept of development and progress differs in the work of Vandana Shiva. In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva draws the movement back from the ideology of 'terra nullius' and Cartesian 'matter' to 'terra mater'. Within Indian cosmology, "feminine principle is characterised by creativity, activity, productivity; diversity in form and aspect; connectedness and interrelationship of all beings, including man; continuity between the human and natural; and sanctity of life in nature" (Shiva 39). Thus, any analysis has to be first drawn from the particular tradition and culture that they are part of rather than the simple imposition of the models of development and mal-development, of nature and culture, and the principles of male and female. The understanding of history, culture, tradition, modernity and development itself varies across societies and cultures. Thus Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" states:

...the universal image of the 'third world woman' (chaste, virgin, veiled woman), images constructed from adding the 'third world difference' to 'sexual difference' are predicted upon assumptions

about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that Western women are secular, liberated and have control over their own lives. I am referring to a discursive self-representation, not necessarily to material reality. If there were a material reality, there would be no need for political movements in the West (353).

Here, the construction of the 'other' as a monolith also leads to the constitution of the 'self' as a monolith.

The critical enquiry of Mohanty and Said focuses on the treatment of the non-western subject of study in literature and cultural works as propagated by hegemonic scholarship. The relation between knowledge and power is critically looked upon within the hegemonic claim of discursive practices. It thus situates the authorial position of the subject who generates such generalisations that are circulated within the purview of political and canonical authorial relations. Said and Mohanty takes the Foucauldian structuralist lingual approach to more practical terms in understanding the nature of discourse and binaries. Both of them reflect upon Foucault's statement on the author function formulated in relation to Barthes's conceptualising of the idea of 'the death of an author'.

The author's functionality within the realm of discourse as reflected by Foucault states the "authors as mere vessels of forms of opinions", but, for Said in the case of Orientalism and discursive post-colonial practices the author is the central philologist, and social historians, explorers, and demographers who have written so extensively on this part of the world are authorities. They are the oracles from which generalized and ultimately commonplace opinions disseminate as power/knowledge. "It's not a question, therefore, of a kind of silent drumbeat of opinion expressing itself over and over again, which is more what interests Foucault" (Fry). Mohanty posits the same concern about the effect of the hegemonic nature of western scholarship in the feminist discourse. According to her, this effect might not be seen as an immediate one but it has dire consequences within the neo imperialistic nature of late capitalism and globalisation. The unawareness of the effect of such discursive hegemonic practices can render it in the hands of neo-imperialism that "not only overlook pluralism but also impede the cause of women" (Mohammadi).

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