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‘UNDER WESTERN EYES: FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND COLONIAL DISCOURSES’

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It ought to be of some political significance at least that the term ‘colonization’ has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general. From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxisms (cf. particularly such contemporary scholars as Baran, Amin and Gunder-Frank) to its use by feminist women of colour in the US, to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women’s movements,¹ the term ‘colonization’ has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the ‘third world.’² However sophisticated or problematical its use as an explanatory construct, colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question. What I wish to analyse here specifically is the production of the ‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (western) feminist texts. The definition of colonization I invoke is a predominantly *discursive* one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe.

My concern about such writings derives from my own implication and investment in contemporary debates in feminist theory and the urgent political necessity of forming strategic coalitions across class, race and national boundaries. Clearly, western feminist discourse and political practice are neither singular nor homogeneous in their goals, interests or analyses. However, it is possible to trace a coherence of *effects* resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the west’ (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis. Thus, rather than claim simplistically that ‘western feminism’ is a monolith, I would like to draw attention to the remarkably similar effects of various analytical categories and even strategies which codify their relationship to the Other in implicitly hierarchical terms. It is in this sense that I use the term ‘western feminist’. Similar arguments pertaining to questions of methods of analysis can be made in terms of middle-class, urban African and Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm and codifies peasant

and working-class histories and cultures as Other. Thus, while this article focuses specifically on western feminist discourse on women in the third world, the critiques I offer also pertain to identical analytical principles employed by third-world scholars writing about their own cultures.

Moreover, the analytical principles discussed below serve to distort western feminist political practices and limit the possibility of coalitions among (usually white) western feminists and working-class and feminist women of colour around the world. These limitations are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently *all* women are expected to organize. The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice and organizing determines the significance and status of western feminist writings on women in the third world for feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, does not comprise merely 'objective' knowledge about a certain subject. It is also a directly political and discursive *practice* insofar as it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses (for example, traditional anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, etc.) and as a political praxis which counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old 'legitimate' and 'scientific' bodies of knowledge. Thus, feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power – relations which they counter, redefine or even implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship.

The relationship between Woman – a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourse (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) – and women – real, material subjects of their collective histories – is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity or a relation of correspondence or simple implication.³ It is an arbitrary relation set up in particular cultural and historical contexts. I would like to suggest that the feminist writing I analyse here discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing /representing a composite, singular 'third-world woman' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse.⁴ I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the west, on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world. An analysis of 'sexual difference' in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I shall call the 'third-world difference' – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries. It is in the production of this 'third-world difference' that western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent western feminist writing and this power needs to be defined and named.

In the context of the west's hegemonic position today, of what Anouar Abdel-Malek calls a struggle for 'control over the orientation, regulation and decision of the process of world development on the basis of the advanced sector's monopoly of scientific knowledge and ideal creativity',⁵ western feminist scholarship on the third world must be seen and examined precisely in terms of its inscription in these particular relations of power and struggle. There is, it should be evident, no universal patriarchal framework which this scholarship attempts to counter and resist – unless one posits

an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, transhistorical power structure. There is, however, a particular world balance of power within which any analysis of culture, ideology and socio-economic conditions has to be necessarily situated. Abdel-Malek is useful here, again, in reminding us about the inherence of politics in the discourses of 'culture':

Contemporary imperialism is, in a real sense, a hegemonic imperialism, exercising to a maximum degree a rationalized violence taken to a higher level than ever before – through fire and sword, but also through the attempt to control hearts and minds. For its content is defined by the combined action of the military – industrial complex and the hegemonic cultural centers of the West, all of them founded on the advanced levels of development attained by monopoly and finance capital, and supported by the benefits of both the scientific and technological revolution and the second industrial revolution itself.⁶

Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in such a global economic and political framework. To do any less would be to ignore the complex interconnections between first- and third-world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in *all* countries. I do not question the descriptive and informative value of most western feminist writings on women in the third world. I also do not question the existence of excellent work which does not fall into the analytic traps I am concerned with. In fact I deal with an example of such work later on. In the context of an overwhelming silence about the experiences of women in these countries, as well as the need to forge international links between women's political struggles, such work is both path-breaking and absolutely essential. However, it is both to the *explanatory potential* of particular analytic strategies employed by such writing and to their *political effect* in the context of the hegemony of western scholarship that I want to draw attention here. While feminist writing in the US is still marginalized (except perhaps from the point of view of women of colour addressing privileged white women), western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship – i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. One such significant effect of the dominant 'representations' of western feminism is its conflation with imperialism in the eyes of particular third-world women.⁷ Hence the urgent need to examine the *political* implications of our *analytic* strategies and principles.

My critique is directed at three basic analytical presuppositions which are present in (western) feminist discourse on women in the third world. Since I focus primarily on the Zed Press 'Women in the Third World' series, my comments on western feminist discourse are circumscribed by my analysis of the texts in this series.⁸ This is a way of focusing my critique. However, even though I am dealing with feminists who identify themselves as culturally or geographically from the 'west', as mentioned earlier, what I say about these presuppositions or implicit principles holds for anyone who uses these analytical strategies, whether third-world women in the west or third-world women in the third world writing on these issues and publishing in the west. Thus, I am not making a culturalist argument about ethnocentrism; rather, I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses. As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse.

The first analytical presupposition I focus on is involved in the strategic location or situation of the category 'women' vis-à-vis, the context of analysis. The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (The context of analysis can be anything from kinship

structures and the organization of labour to media representations.) The second analytical presupposition is evident on the methodological level, in the uncritical way ‘proof’ of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided. The third is a more specifically political presupposition, underlying the methodologies and the analytic strategies, i.e., the model of power and struggle they imply and suggest. I argue that as a result of the two modes – or, rather, frames – of analysis described above, a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an ‘average third-world woman’. This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions. The distinction between western feminist re-presentation of women in the third world and western feminist self-presentation is a distinction of the same order as that made by some Marxists between the ‘maintenance’ function of the housewife and the real ‘productive’ role of wage-labour, or the characterization by developmentalists of the third world as being engaged in the lesser production of ‘raw materials’ in contrast to the real ‘productive’ activity of the first world. These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent. Men involved in wage-labour, first-world producers and, I suggest, western feminists who sometimes cast third-world women in terms of ‘ourselves undressed’⁹ all construct themselves as the normative referent in such a binary analytic.

‘WOMEN’ AS CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS OR: WE ARE ALL SISTERS IN STRUGGLE

By women as a category of analysis, I am referring to the crucial presupposition that all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identifiable prior to the process of analysis. The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between ‘women’ as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history.¹⁰ Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of ‘women’ as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labelled ‘powerless’, ‘exploited’, ‘sexually harassed’, etc., by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. (Notice that this is quite similar to sexist discourse labelling women as weak, emotional, having math anxiety, etc.) The focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as ‘powerless’ in a particular context. It is rather on finding a variety of cases of ‘powerless’ groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.¹¹

In this section I focus on five specific ways in which ‘women’ as a category of analysis is used in western feminist discourse on women in the third world to construct ‘third-world women’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular cultural and socio-economic systems. I have chosen to deal with a variety of writers – from Fran Hosken, who writes primarily about female genital mutilation, to writers from the Women in International Development school who write about the effect of development policies on third-world women for both western and third-world audiences. I do not intend to equate all the texts that I analyse, nor will I ignore their respective strengths and weaknesses. The authors I deal with write with varying degrees of care and complexity; however, the *effect*