

Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism

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Women in developing countries often find western feminist models unsuitable for them. Subtle, low-key resistance to oppression can be more effective and do more to build solidarity than direct challenges and confrontation, especially in the male-dominated workplace. Employers, trade unions and other elements of the patriarchy must accept the validity and the power of women's informal cultural resistance. Feminists must try not to impose rigid western norms on other ethnic groups but allow them the freedom to devise their own strategy of resistance.

Introduction

The crisis in development is paralleled by the crisis in feminism. Both have reached an impasse, i.e. both have negated the usefulness of grand theory and are also in danger of plummeting to the depths of that other extreme, cultural relativism. This is characterised by simplistic cultural comparisons without recourse to political and economic analysis. Nederveen Pieterse aspires to a new pluralism within development discourse through which '...the field of debate is opened wide, the focal points are no longer confined to the bipolar confrontation between capitalism and Marxism'.¹ He advocates 'a profound historical and cultural review of the western [development] project.'² This must be extended to the study of women also so that we no longer have to rely on the ethnocentric analytical tools of Western feminism.

Thus the central aim of this paper is to show that the descriptive and normative dimensions of western feminism are found to be sadly lacking when applied to non-western societies. Geeta Somjee accuses Western feminists of theoretical reductionism.³ This may be defined as seeking universal validity for their arguments by attempting to homogenise complex and internally changing aspects of social reality in order to fit neatly into their theoretical models.

This paper begins by briefly describing different theoretical strands within Western feminist thought. This will be followed by an argument for the continued incorporation of ethnographic studies within feminism which has been initiated by feminist anthropologists. Moore asserts that 'anthropology . . . is able to provide cross-cultural data which demonstrates the western bias in much mainstream feminist theorising'.⁴ After all, oppression is experienced first and foremost at the personal and local levels, i.e. in the realm of the mind, the home and the local community. Objective economic and patriarchal conditions are interpreted through the subjective filter of consciousness, which is culture-specific. Thus it is to the study of culture we must look for the creation of a more meaningful feminist paradigm. Peter Worsley says that culture 'supplies a project, a design for living'.⁵ Many dimensions of women's oppression cut across class and a materialist analysis thereof will not suffice. Macro-studies of political economy must thus be augmented by anthropological data so that instead of trying to create 'sameness' where it does not exist, we can instead celebrate difference. We must turn to the study of culture to show that women who are ostensibly passive often resist patriarchy in many inventive yet practical ways, as it exists in their own local environment.

The inadequacies of western feminism

A problem in Western feminist circles is that more time and effort is spent on ideological nit-picking than on the formulation of strategies to redress the problems they highlight. In the following section I briefly outline the theoretical concepts of Marxist and radical feminism and show how ethnography should be an essential element in each of these in order to strengthen their arguments. These theorists have to

adopt an international perspective in order to avoid the common traps of racism and Eurocentrism.

(A) Marxist feminism

This branch of feminism emerged due to a dissatisfaction with the lack of gender analysis in classic Marxist theory, which was deemed 'sex-blind'.⁶ Thereafter, a Marxist feminist body of work emerged which blamed the capitalist mode of production for female subjugation; for example, Sheila Rowbotham argued that woman's role within the family actually maintains capitalism by providing it with the human relations it cannot provide in the world of men's work.⁷ A corollary of this was, of course, that if women did enter the wage-earning sphere of work, they still maintained the housekeeping role as well, and so were left with a 'double load'. Harry Braverman suggested that women constituted the ideal 'reserve army of labour' for capital because of their reproductive and domestic roles.⁸

Thus emerged the distinction between the 'public sphere', the wage-earning workplace dominated by men, and the 'private sphere' of the household, upheld by women.⁹ Child-bearing was conveniently slotted into the category of 'reproduction', a concept intended to subsume both procreation (the reproduction of the species) and consumption (the use of commodities to reproduce capitalism). Much debate has ensued as to what extent women's oppression is separate from the exploitation of the working class and also to what extent it is located at the level of ideology.¹⁰ Marxist feminists adopted the term 'patriarchy' to fill this conceptual hiatus. The strategy for change propounded by Marxist feminism was to establish solidarity with the working class in a united bid to oust capitalism and to establish a socialist world order, thereby freeing workers and women from oppression.

I would argue that Marxist feminism is as much a product of capitalist relations of production in the west as the specific type of female subjugation these breed in industrialised nations. The commoditisation of women's labour took a very specific form in industrialising Europe, with wage-labour being 'productive' and domestic labour 'non-productive'.¹¹ It is folly to presume that today, the sexual division of labour within the home and the manifestations of the capitalist mode of production are the same from the Rockies to the Andes to the Himalayas. Townsend and Momsen bear strong testament to this fact.¹² Thus while these theorists deem Marxism 'sex-blind', I would describe Marxist feminism as being 'culture-blind'. The Marxist feminist notion

of patriarchy is not at all clearly defined; thus in its present form it is not a useful conceptual tool in the analysis of women's oppression, as it is expressed in all its varied forms throughout the world. Michele Barrett points out that gender divisions existed in Europe prior to the transition to capitalism, as they do in the many subsistence economies today.¹³ It is presumed by Marxist feminists that all of women's problems derive from capitalism and no other mode of production is adequately discussed. So I believe that Marxist feminism, just like Marxism itself, is guilty of a certain evolutionary, Eurocentric bias because it assumes that all societies will inevitably become industrialised according to the European design. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg: 'capital is faced with difficulties because vast tracts of the globe's surface are in the possession of social organisations that have no desire for commodity exchange or cannot, because of the entire social structure and the forms of ownership, offer for sale the productive forces in which capital is primarily interested.'¹⁴

It also presumes the existence of a nuclear family structure, which is unknown in many parts of the world. Modern capitalism also has created an extensive male-oriented migrant labour pattern in many Third World countries which leaves the woman the head of household.¹⁵ In fact, it has been estimated that from one quarter to one third of households worldwide are headed by women.¹⁶ Another vital aspect of women's employment that is ignored here is the operation of the informal economy, which provides the means of subsistence for millions of women.

(B) Radical feminism

Another school of feminists expresses the aforementioned 'patriarchy' as an over-arching category of male dominance which is analytically independent of the capitalist or any other mode of production.¹⁷ Proponents of this radical interpretation of patriarchy say that men's sexual power over women is the fundamental political division in society, that is 'more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform and certainly more enduring'.¹⁸ Therefore, according to these theorists, women are defined primarily through their procreative role, no matter what the existent economic structure may be. Shulamith Firestone goes so far as to advocate the substitution of sex for class as the main engine of change in a materialist account of history; therefore women's control over their bodies is seen as the main objective.¹⁹

It is vital to avoid the use of transhistorical, transcultural concepts which obscure important differences in women's experience throughout the world. It appears to me that this is exactly the manner in which radical feminists use the concept of patriarchy. Firstly, they seem to adopt women's role as procreators too readily and do not provide any analysis of women's labour outside the home. Neither do they acknowledge that women's experience of patriarchal structures varies enormously due to economic, historical and cultural circumstances. It is a fallacy to suggest that there exists a global model of patriarchal domination. 'Freedom' certainly does not mean the same thing to all the women of the world.

This paper argues that it is possible to redeem all of the aforementioned concepts, i.e. patriarchy, public and private spheres of production, sexual division of labour etc., simply by becoming more flexible in our outlook. Moore succinctly describes the fear which western feminists feel at confronting differences in women's experience: 'The problem for feminism is that the concept of difference threatens to deconstruct the isomorphism, the "sameness" and with it the whole edifice on which feminist politics is based.'²⁰

These are all useful building blocks in our analysis, but we must avoid the intellectual rigidity and tunnel vision that an over-emphasis on any one of these can foster. The manner in which patriarchy and capitalism manifest themselves in concrete terms results from complex interactions between economic, ideological and cultural systems;²¹ the means that women use in resisting them are equally varied. The issues around which women's demonstrations of dissent are organised are very different throughout the world and while western feminists have sometimes provided a blueprint for protest, the final plans are necessarily tailored to suit the specific needs of women worldwide.

The role of culture

How then do we inject this flexibility and vitality into western feminism? Firstly, it bears repeating that its inherent concepts are indeed vital in our analysis because male domination is indeed universal. Secondly, I believe that the void in feminism as we know it results from the inadequate integration of the cultural dimension in political and economic analyses.

Before focussing upon the contribution of cultural studies to feminism, it is important to stress the centrality of that area which is emphasised by Marxist feminists: the economic sphere. The impact of colonialism and the penetration of capitalism have certainly exacerbated existing gender divisions.²² Also, the type and level of industrialisation has led to the creation of very diverse circumstances for women. As Nanneke Redclift puts it: '...the differing paths of transition to capitalism give rise to varying forms of relationship between the family and the productive system, and these themselves are influenced by the precise configuration of the local market and its position in the national and international economy.'²³

From studies of the experience of women in different economic circumstances, we can see that it is not useful to apply theoretical concepts in a fixed, determinate way because this leads to a kind of 'monism'.²⁴ By this is meant the over-emphasis on one particular dimension of experience, be it in the public or private sphere. This is of limited use to any development theory or strategy because it is essential that patriarchy and capitalism be recognised and analysed as multi-faceted phenomena.

While the economic sphere is central to an analysis of women's role in society, study of it alone is far from adequate. In the words of Gayle Rubin: 'No analysis of the reproduction of labour power under capitalism can explain foot-binding, chastity belts, or any of the incredible array of Byzantine, fetishized indignities, let alone the more ordinary ones, which have been inflicted upon women in various times and places'.²⁵ It is at this juncture that we take recourse to anthropology which 'seeks to fashion a set of terms in which . . . we can comprehend both generically what it means to be human, to be a person at all, and also what it means to be a person of a particular time and place, fashioned within some unique, historically-realised configuration of social and cultural circumstances'.²⁶ The object of anthropological study, culture is quite a difficult concept with which to come to terms. Peter Worsley describes it as 'the realm of those crucial institutions in which the ideas we live by are produced and through which they are communicated – and penetrate even the economy'.²⁷ This definition implies then that culture is the 'filter' through which we perceive the world around us. The social structure both creates and is created by the meanings attached to everyday aspects of life. Therefore a two-way continuum of influence, a dialectic, operates between culture and socio-economic structure and this dialectic is now beginning to be addressed by feminism.²⁸

It is by examining this dialectic between culture and social structure that we can assess the relevance of existing social scientific models such as feminist theories. Ethnographic enquiry helps us to determine whether they are in fact realistic when applied to specific peoples and places. This view is advocated by Marcus and Fischer: 'Ethnography is thus the sensitive register of change at the level of experience, and it is this kind of understanding that seems critical when the concepts of systems perspectives are descriptively out of joint with the reality to which they are meant to refer.'²⁹

It is only through the use of this data that we can learn about women in other places. Western feminism offers little in terms of imaginative strategies for change whereas a wealth of these are provided by non-Western feminists, as I intend to show. Only by studying these can we begin to understand and establish solidarity with women in other parts of the world, thus gaining strength from diversity.

Culture as a patriarchal weapon

Thierry Verheslt emphasises that we should show real solidarity with projects that encourage cultural heterogeneity as a means of 'delinking' from global exploitative relations of production. He describes this as 'the refusal to continue submitting the economy and politics to the imperatives of 'interdependence', 'co-development', and 'global village' illusions'.³⁰ Goulet also emphasises the cultural dimension.³¹ However, 'culture' and 'tradition' are often deliberately confused and many manifestations of this phenomenon are directly responsible for the subjugation of millions of women, as illustrated by the following examples.

Nationalist movements are often guilty of misinterpreting culture and tradition. Many of these movements are nominally pro-feminist. Some Islamic nationalist movements such as those of Iran and Algeria provide worthy examples. The liberation of women is indeed a priority for Muslims in theory, but they are faced with huge dilemmas when confronted with the forces of religious fervour and traditionalism. This process is exacerbated during neo-colonial battles when 'the forces of both modernity and tradition are unleashed in a single stroke and confront each other with dramatic consequences for relations between the sexes'.³² In Eritrea, many women fought on the frontline along

with men, yet when they return home they still have to conform to Islamic rule.³³

There has been a sharp upsurge in fundamentalism in many major religions in recent times.³⁴ Concern for the preservation of traditional family structures and cultures has been used to legitimise the maintenance of the sexual divide. In Iran, since the overthrow of the Shah, 'the Government has become a theocracy wedded to the subordination of women'.³⁵ El Sadaawi, the Egyptian feminist, suggests that governments and politicians pick from Islamic scripture what suits them to justify their position.³⁶ Nationalist movements are often very conservative with regard to sex roles and, at the end of the day, they usually advocate the maintenance of women's traditional role as mother and homemaker so as not to upset the moral code or divert people from the 'cause'. In Ireland, Eamon de Valera expressed these concerns in the 1937 Irish Constitution. The relevant article still exists:

Article 41 - 'The Family':

1.1. The State recognises the Family as the natural, primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable . . . rights antecedent and superior to all positive law. . . .

2.1. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2.2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.³⁷

Some legal provisions obviously aim to keep women subordinate, both legally and economically. Such conservatism is called 'culture' but it is really 'tradition': culture is here seen as something to which we return rather than a complex and dynamic contemporary process. We thus witness the aforementioned confusion of tradition and culture.

This paper argues that it is not for us in the west to indiscriminately prescribe the preservation of particular traditions. Instead, it is our role to become more humble and to listen to others' views. Consider the contentious issue of female circumcision: on one side are the cultural relativists who argue for the preservation of all aspects of regional cultures and on the other, the feminists who argue for its abolition because of the terrible effect it has on the health and sexuality of the women in question. The role of western participants in development

debates such as this is to enter into dialogue with and listen to the women in question and not to attempt to impose our morals on them. Steinem and Morgan inform us that there is quite a lot of campaigning against female circumcision already by local women in the affected countries. They go on to say that 'it's hopeful, too, that such patriarchal practices are beginning to be understood as a universal problem in varying degrees, not the fault of one culture or religion'.³⁸ El Sadaawi extends this point by saying that 'educational circumcision is as harmful as physical circumcision . . . because it creates the illusion that you are complete and free'.³⁹ By studying such problems as this, we can 'build an incremental picture of their researched common denominator.'⁴⁰ The manifestations of patriarchy are so diverse that we have to confront the differences as well as the similarities in women's experience in order to broaden the base of feminism.

'Cultural' resistance

In many societies, women are publicly perceived as oppressed and yet simultaneously exercise a certain amount of control within their own spheres. We thus need to examine the relatively invisible means by which women exert this control. It is only by using the tools of ethnographic analysis that we can embark upon a study of 'cultural' resistance as it is practiced by ordinary people, particularly women. Grand social theory often tends to assume that people passively accept the hand that society deals them. Marxism deems only one course of action to be valid for the poor – revolution. This scenario is far from accurate. James C. Scott, in his book *Weapons of the Weak* argues that, in the case of peasants, it is the everyday forms of resistance that are the most effective in the long run. By these are meant 'the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. . . . They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does 'between revolts' to defend its interests as best it can.'⁴¹

Much of what Scott says about the peasantry can easily be transferred to the study of women's resistance. In reality, most

poor women are too busy simply trying to survive within the existing system to even think about changing it. Also, since patriarchy in all its forms is hegemonic, it by definition sets the parameters of consciousness for many women. Patriarchy is grounded in the economic but also in the cultural. Because of the huge diversity of its manifestations, it is farcical to expect all women to reach the same conclusions about their condition. For example, women have very different means of achieving their desired goals. Many young Muslim women choose to wear the chador, their traditional dress, to resist western sex stereotyping. Indeed El Sadaawi informs us that Algerian women, during their revolution, used the chador to hide weapons, to carry guns, i.e. they used a manifestation of patriarchy for revolutionary purposes.⁴² Thierry Verheslt tells us of the Chipko women's group in India who prevented a logging company from cutting down their local forest by hugging the trees and thus stopping the machines. If the trees were cut down, their livelihood and culture would have been threatened so they literally took the matter into their own hands.⁴³ These are two very different means of feminist resistance from which we can learn, both about others and about ourselves. The richness that only people can provide is thus infused into feminism.

Capitalism itself breeds a myriad of different modes of resistance to what Marx called 'commodity fetishism'. Taussig describes this as when 'the products of the interrelations of persons are no longer seen as such but as things that stand over, control, and in some vital sense may even produce people.'⁴⁴ Scott argues that it is not only the formal political avenues that count in this struggle but also the informal ones, e.g., women workers in a textile factory gossiping about the boss or doing their job in a careless fashion.⁴⁵ Both of these are relatively invisible and acceptable forms of resistance which operate within the existing system. These women are not seeking to change the economic structure but just to improve their lot within it by changing the dominant ideological system within the workplace. Gramsci was the first Marxist to emphasise this ideological sphere: 'The oppressed must demystify the ideological armour of the status quo and create their own "integrated culture" prior to and within the process of achieving economic and political control, it follows that destroying this hegemonic totality must be central to . . . any revolutionary movement.'⁴⁶

The furthest these women can go within formal institutions to achieve their short-term objectives is to join the trade union because this is the only forum for dissent which is

accommodated by capitalism. Even this is often beyond the realm of possibility because unions are generally male-dominated and women are put off joining them.

This emphasis on cultural resistance and informal politics turns on its head the idea that if exploitative relations of production exist, the subjected people will almost by a process of osmosis develop revolutionary ideas and subsequently act on them. Even if these people do perceive their exploitation as part of a global system, this perception may often remain at the level of ideology and not translate into practice. While some marxists may allow for the difficulties involved in this process, there has been little analysis of alternative strategies for resistance on their part. The risks resulting from overt revolutionary action for women in many Third World countries may range from social ridicule to torture to death.

People find many different ways of resisting what Ivan Illich terms 'the modernisation of poverty'. This occurs when our whole lives are determined by market forces, when we become inseparable from commodities.⁴⁷

Lorelei Harris' 1980 study of women factory workers in the West of Ireland is interesting from the angle of cultural resistance to industrial capitalism. Harris shows how the women adapt to doing such repetitive work by resorting to an Irish cultural construct, i.e. 'the crack', by which is meant fun, gossip, etc. They resist the state of 'alienated worker' by focussing instead on the positive aspects of camaraderie and solidarity which are associated with work. She says: 'For men, the "crack" is a continuation of forms of male association which exist outside work. For women . . . it is specific to work. It gives them a way of defining themselves sharply against male workers and a weapon against the gender inequalities they see as emanating from men on the shop floor, backed by the unions.'⁴⁸

This type of resistance directly parallels that of the peasants described by Scott. They share the characteristics of being pragmatic, acceptable to the authorities, non-confrontational, requiring no coordination or planning and being a form of individual self-help. I would argue that these informal means of establishing solidarity are vital to the subsequent creation of a collective feminist consciousness.

In order to understand how a feminist consciousness could be thus formed, we must reconceptualise 'militancy'. In studies of women in the workplace, there has been a common confusion between women's militancy and trade union activism.⁴⁹ Purcell points out how, in her research in Britain,

many women workers consciously decided not to join the very male-dominated union but instead perceived it as more effective to bargain at a local level. It was not deemed necessary to directly challenge this 'club' and they decided to try to achieve their objectives in an alternative manner. Therefore militancy in these circumstances could be defined as a decision to act in a rational fashion around a specific issue. Informal forms of solidarity are central to the development of such local initiatives which can be used to challenge capitalist and patriarchal power structures. An example of such a local initiative is provided by Mitter.⁵⁰ She describes an alternative type of union in India which protects some of the poorest members of that society. SEWA contains home-workers from the textile industry, street vendors, basket-makers etc., many of whom are 'untouchables'. This type of initiative demonstrates an ability to deal with a worldwide problem – the exploitation of women in the black economy. Obviously, formal union politics in the west finds it very difficult to deal with this issue and it is only by studying informal resistance and solidarity that progress can be made with regard to this and many other issues. Some development agencies are beginning to utilise these insights in order to encourage 'women's initiatives' throughout the world.

Conclusion

Because of their exclusive nature, western feminist normative models isolate and marginalise the actions and experiences of many Third World women. Scott tells us that 'the main function of a system of domination is . . . to define what is realistic . . . and to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of the impossible, the realm of the dreams, of wishful thinking'.⁵¹ Women often resist capitalist and patriarchal domination in anonymous, invisible ways which may ultimately serve their interests much more efficiently than an overt challenge to the existing system. These forms of resistance are rendered impotent by macro-economic analyses and are often obscured by feminist rhetoric which may homogenise whole dimensions of experience. It is only by the continued use of ethnographic data by feminists that we can see that it is the everyday, subjective interpretation of capitalism and patriarchy that shapes how women resist them. It is from 'the continual war of wits'⁵² between women and men and between capital and labour as it is expressed throughout the world that the harvest of feminist cultural resistance may be reaped.

Footnotes

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7. Sheila Rowbotham, (1973), *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books
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23. Redclift, (1988), op.cit.
24. M. Albert et al, (1986), *Liberating Theory*, Boston, South End Press, p.41
25. Gayle Rubin, (1975), 'The traffic in women: notes on the political economy of sex' in R.R. Reiter (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press
26. C.S. Kessler, (1987), 'Marx as cultural theorist: the prehistory of modern anthropology' in D.J. Austin-Broos, *Creating Culture*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin
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28. We have also seen how central cultural values have been to the development of political philosophies, e.g., the Ujamaa philosophy of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania: 'Ujamaa is a brand of African socialism... characterised by African traditional values such as community and solidarity': P. Frostin, (1988), *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, Lund, Lund University Press
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43. Verheslt, (1990), op.cit., p.45
44. M. Taussig, (1980), *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, N. Carolina, University of N. Carolina Press. Taussig takes the concept of commodity fethishism and shows how two tribes of South American Indians resist it by relying strongly on a set of indigenous cultural constructs. They ameliorate the effects of capitalism by retreating into their own cultural world when they enter into a wage-labour contract. This study is ideal because it places a familiar social scientific concept under an ethnographic microscope; it is examined for its utility through the eyes of a very different cultural group, affording it enormous richness as a result. In so doing, Taussig firstly leads us to examine our own relationship to capiralism, sccondly shows us that not all people passively absorb the capitalist cultural precepts of the market, competition etc., and thirdly demonstrates the importance of the cultural realm to the development of a militant political consciousness for it is here that a duel may be fought for ideological hegemony.
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51. Scott, (1985), op.cit., p.326
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