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In spite of challenges by “black” and “third world” women, do mainstream feminist theories still reflect the concerns of white women?

By Sherry Chopra¹

Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which, despite challenges by “black” and “third world” women, mainstream feminist theory continues to be dominated by the concerns of white women. It considers the problematic nature of categories such as “white women’s interests” and “black women’s concerns” – specifically the reification of racial or ethnic identity that they imply. Such a process ignores the complex power hierarchies and often-conflicting interests of groups and individuals within them. Having destabilized homogenous definitions of group interests and identities, however, it becomes necessary to conceptualize ways of discussing, theorizing and organizing against patterns of material, social and political inequalities in a racist society. In such a context, categorization based on constructed group boundaries can be a useful and sometimes powerful tool in the discussion, critique and dismantling of racist hierarchies of power. These group boundaries must be presented as shape shifting, historically specific and responsive – constructed in a context of common or overlapping struggles. “Black” and “third world” women’s challenges to mainstream feminism have highlighted the ways in which issues central to their lives have been misrepresented, fetishized or rendered invisible. They have demanded recognition of the global imbalances in within which mainstream feminist agendas are structured. Such critiques have resulted in theoretical responses from within mainstream feminisms, including the importance now given to the politics of location and attempts to destabilize “whiteness”. This paper argues that these responses are important, and that some change has occurred, but that “black” and “third world” women continue to be marginalized within mainstream feminist theory and that analytical categories and frameworks must be altered and power hierarchies continually challenged before mainstream feminisms begin to address issues and concerns other than those of white, middle-class women in any sustained manner.

Key Words:

“Had what is understood as feminism been constructed from Sojourner Truth’s perspective, how might its agenda have looked? What priorities would it have set up for women’s liberation? How would it have treated difference?” (Aziz 1992, p.292)

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After over two decades of sustained critiques by “black” and “third world”² women, feminists in the academy have generally come to recognize that mainstream feminist theories have reflected the concerns and interests of a privileged few; namely those of white, middle class women. These theories have done so under the pretense of speaking for “all women.” Adrienne Rich has used the term “white solipsism” (Rich’s term, quoted in Aziz 1992, p.297) to describe the tendency of mainstream feminisms to see the world in terms of the white gaze, which informs thought and political practice, including the production of theory. Therefore, critiques by black and third world women have pointed to the inability of these theories to speak to their experiences “in any meaningful way.” (Amos and Parmar 1984, p.4) Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar have argued that the issue is not merely the absence of black and third world women within these feminisms, and therefore the “solution” cannot simply be their “inclusion.” Instead, central categories of analysis within mainstream feminisms have to be challenged, and their historical and contemporary positions accounted for (Amos and Parmar 1984, p.4).

In this paper I will consider the extent to which, despite challenges by black and third world women, feminist theory continues to be dominated by the concerns of white women. To do this, I will examine some of the critiques made by black and third world women, and how they have been taken up by mainstream feminisms. I will also consider the politics of location and attempts to destabilized “whiteness”, which have emerged as theoretical responses to these critiques. I will assess their possible value and limitations. Initially, however, I will examine the problematic yet sometimes necessary nature of phrases such as “white women’s concerns” and “black women’s interests”. I will argue that though there have been some important responses and some change has occurred, black and third world women continue to be marginalized within mainstream feminist theory.

The presentation of racial, ethnic or regional identities or interests as fixed and homogenous has the dangerous effect of making invisible complex and important differences. Chandra Mohanty has argued that this discursive process “colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women.” (Mohanty 1991, p.71). Defining the concerns of “white”, “black” or “third world” women is problematic because it ignores the complex power hierarchies and often-conflicting interests of groups and individuals classified as such. Class, region, religion, types and phases of diaspora, and residence in the “first” or “third” world are only a few of the continually reconfiguring axes within which identities and interests are formed and reformed. If, as in this paper, I use the term “third world” to define an aspect of my identity, I must problematize my usage of it and account for my middle class upbringing in “multicultural” urban North America. I must consider how my interests, as I currently define them, differ from other black and third world women (from and living in different regions, of different classes and castes), both in Toronto (where

² Both “black” and “third world” are problematic terms that homogenize important differences and antagonisms based on history, location, region of birth and residence, class, caste, language, religion, and sexuality. Yet I find them preferable to the term “women of colour”, which not only negates “white” as a “colour” or racial category, thereby continuing to render it invisible, but has strong associations with “Coloured”, the term used to describe “other” people from slavery onwards in the North American context. I use “black” to refer to people of African-American/Caribbean heritage in the west, and “third world” for people in and descendant from the geographical third world. These terms can overlap. Though “third world” peoples born or living in the west may not necessarily define themselves as such, I will problematically use the term in order to be able to speak about experiences (though varied) of discursive, social and legal “othering” within these contexts. Because I am using “third world” in place of “of colour”, I (again problematically) will use the term to describe myself for the purpose of this essay.

I grew up) and New Delhi (where I was born). Living in a racist society may be cause for my definition (by self and others) as a “third world woman.” However, my privileged class and geographical positionings mean that I, through my consumer choices for example, possibly harm the interests of black and third world women situated differently from me in complex ways. Interests cannot be defined through the reification of one aspect of a person’s identity, because identity is performed, shifting, fragmented, filtered, interpreted, and composed of complex, overlapping and contradictory affiliations (Haraway 1991; Mohanty 1992; Brah 1996).

Any simple distinctions, therefore, between individuals defined as members of “powerful” or “powerless”, “colonizing” or “colonized” groups are simplistic (Loomba 1998, p.105). Instead, it is important to analyze how the identities and group interests of colonized peoples were in many ways shaped by (and did not predate in any “pure” state) the historical and material processes of colonialism, just as the identities of those within colonizing nations were shaped by very different experiences of these process. Interests of “colonizer”/“powerful” and “colonized”/“powerless” are fragmented, interconnected and cannot be made transparent at will; they are historically produced through complex processes and exercises of power. Maria Lugones, speaking of the Hispana context, recognizes this when she asks; “Where do *we* begin? To what extend are our experience and its articulation affected by being a colonized people?” (Lugones and Spelman 1983, p.576).

Having destabilized homogenous definitions of group interests and identities, however, questions of how to go about discussing, theorizing, and organizing around patterns of material, social, political inequities remain. Gayatri Spivak has argued for the value of “strategic essentialism” and the use of the “necessary fiction” of “pure subaltern” consciousness which, not to be mistaken as universal truths, can be used as tools for critiquing dominant discourses for political ends (Gilbert 1997, p.88). However, Spivak strongly warns of the dangers of presenting strategic fictions as “Truths.” Assumption of the role of “native informant” (Spivak 1999, p.169), and attitudes of “nativism” and “reverse ethnocentrism” (Spivak 1999, p.76) reify cultures and allow self-appointed “representatives” to define group boundaries and interests according to their own motivations. Thus, group boundaries must be presented as shape shifting, historically specific and responsive. They need to be reconceptualized: defined “not by common oppression so much as a common context of struggle and resistance.” (Aziz 1992, p.295). Thus, while constructions of group boundaries and interests must be destabilized and accounted for, they can be useful political tools (Aziz 1992, p.304). It is with this understanding and for this reason that I attempt to use them in this paper.

Black and third world women have challenged mainstream feminism by demonstrating how issues that concern them have been rendered invisible or misrepresented, as well as the ways in which they have been depicted as objects to be rescued and spoken for. They have demanded recognition of the global imbalances in the postcolonial world within which mainstream feminist agendas are structured (Loomba 1998, p.230). They have insisted on a “history that takes black women as *subjects* and *agents* and not as victims.” (Aziz 1992, p.292). Mohanty has used the term “third world difference” to describe “that stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in these countries.” (Mohanty 1991, p.54). She also points out how third world women are often written about in terms of “needs” and “problems,” rarely emphasizing “choices” or freedom to act (Mohanty 1991, p.64). These images, by implicit contrast, present western women as “modern,” “liberated” agents and western societies as more “advanced.” This is evident in the ways that mainstream feminisms have fetishized issues such as arranged marriages, purdah, and female-headed households (Amos and Parmar 1984, p.11), as well as female

circumcision, sati and practices of veiling. Such issues, removed from their historical, political and economic contexts, present “other” cultures as backward and inherently oppressive.

While certain issues have been seized upon and distorted by mainstream feminisms, others have been neglected. Amos and Parmar have argued that “the power of sisterhood stops at the point at which hard political decisions need to be made and political priorities decided.” (Amos and Parmar 1984, p.4). Black and third world women’s scholarship has demonstrated the legacy of racism within western feminisms, including the:

eugenicism in both the early and more recent birth control movements, the eager acceptance of the majority of the suffragettes of imperialistic nationalism, [and] the failure of anti-rape campaigns to challenge racist stereotypes of the sexuality of black men. (Bhavnani and Coulson 2001, p.66)

The ways advocates of reproductive rights have ignored the forced sterilization or testing of contraceptives on black and third world women, and theorists of the “welfare” state and “the family” have neglected racist immigration and welfare policies have also been critiqued. In the U.S. context as late as the mid-1980s, 25% of Native women and 10% of Native men had been sterilized without informed consent, the average life expectancy within their communities was 55 years and the average unemployment rate fell between 60-90% (Statistics as of 1986 in Gunn-Allen 2001, p.131). These issues and the people they directly affect have been and still are neglected and rendered invisible within mainstream feminisms. Again the question must be asked; whose concerns do mainstream feminisms reflect?

Mainstream feminist theories, with their distortions and exclusions, have informed media discourses and representations and state policies; thus they have had dangerous effects on the lives of black and third world women. In such a context, mainstream feminists have been criticized for seeking “to establish their authority on the backs of non-white women – determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives.” (Ong 2001, p.108).

Critiques by black and third world women have resulted in the awareness of race and class as axes of identity and experience formation within mainstream feminisms. Another result of charges of racism and ethnocentrism has been an increase in attempts to include the “voices” and interests of “other” women. However, the ways in which their interests have been defined, and the spaces in which black and third world women have been able to speak, have reinforced their marginalization and ghettoization. Lectures and courses on “race”, “development” and “postcolonial theory” have become spaces in which the works of black and third world women are most often read, and their concerns considered. While it is very important to address and theorize these issues, the danger of presenting them as the total sum of the concerns of all black and third world women must be recognized. Otherwise, this becomes another limiting and essentializing trope that ignores the complexity and heterogeneity of the interests, experiences and privileges of black and third world women. The limiting of the spaces where black and third world women are allowed to speak also implicitly depicts racism, (post)colonialism and “development” as the concerns solely of black and third world women in the west or “over there” in the “third world.” As Charles argues,

“[t]he minority self is placed in this ghettoized space where subjects of the dominant classes, castes, sexuality and colour can look at you, and if possible, ‘help’ you to fight against that which is silently deemed ‘your problem.’ (Charles 1992, p.33)

The inclusion, in more than a token manner, of the scholarship of black and third world women on issues such as sexuality, politics, psychology and economics, has yet to occur. Irene Gedalof, writing at the end of the 1990s, states that “[w]hile there is much Western feminist scholarship that takes the situation of women in non-Western contexts as its object of inquiry,” it is still:

rare for white Western women to do theory through an extended and detailed engagement with feminist scholarship emerging from non-Western contexts, or even from diasporic communities in the West.” (Gedalof 1999, p.3)

This scholarship addresses a complex range of issues. It must be made visible and engaged with in order to challenge the ethnocentric concepts and marginalizing frameworks that still exist within mainstream academic feminisms.

Two theoretical responses within mainstream feminisms to the critiques of black and third world women have been the “politics of location,” which emerged in the mid-1980s, and attempts to destabilize “whiteness” in the nineties. The “politics of location,” a phrase coined by Adrienne Rich, emerged within the U.S. context. In her famous essay, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” Rich stated that “a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist, I am created and trying to create.” (Rich 1986, p.212). Rich acknowledged the dangers of speaking for “all women” and argued that feminist theories and theorists had to locate themselves and be accountable for the representations they produced. She locates herself in her body, the place where power relationships are most fundamentally experienced; she examines the privilege of “this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go.” (Rich 1986 p.215). Rich’s strong argument for location, though it failed to destabilize and therefore implicitly legitimized categories such as “white”, “North American”, and “woman”, signified an important response within mainstream feminism to critiques by black and third world women. Her ideas have been further developed and problematized by feminists working in diverse contexts (Haraway 1991; Mohanty 1992; Kaplan 1994; Brah 1996).

While location can lead to more responsible and accountable theoretical work, it can become a form of “autobiographical narcissism”³ when reduced to nothing more than a sentence or two about the different categories that compose a theorist’s positioning. Rosie Braidotti’s conceptualization of the “nomad” comes dangerously close to this. Though Braidotti alludes to the importance of location, she goes on to define her “nomad” as a “figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity.” (Braidotti 1994, p.22). Her “nomad” travels freely and without care and “is only passing through.” (Braidotti 1994, p.33). Braidotti not only romanticizes the “nomad,” she fails to examine the position of privilege from which she speaks. She has been criticized for her failure to account for her position, as well as “how and why [her nomad] travels, where she comes from and what she takes with her” (Gedalof 1991, p.136). By failing to examine questions of location in her work, Braidotti “subtly reintroduces sameness in the name of difference, and hierarchy in the name of multiplicity” (Gedalof 1991, p.131). Thus, though location may represent an attempt to produce more accountable and responsible scholarship, if it is

³ Dr. Clare Hemmings’ term used in a Gender Epistemologies and Research Methodologies class at LSE.

not theorized, problematized and rigorously engaged with, location can have the same dangerous effects as universalizing theories that claim to represent the concerns of “all” women.

The interrogation of “whiteness” as a privileged yet unmarked racial “norm” is another response to the critiques of black and third world women. The failure to theorize “whiteness” has obscured power imbalances as well as the roles white women may play in the maintenance of racism. The use of terms such as “non-white” to describe black and third world people, position them as deviant from this “norm.” The destabilization of “whiteness” has demonstrated that though it is a diverse and fragmented construct, “whiteness” still “allows for access to real privileges in social relations of persistent inequity, even when people are disempowered by gender and class.” (Lewis and Ramazanoglu 1999, p.31). Thus, attempts to destabilize “whiteness” as a racial category represent an important development. Without corresponding and significant shifts in feminist power hierarchies, however, this response again risks being reduced to a narcissistic gesture – that of white women interrogating their “identities” while refusing to alter racist power structures which have allotted positions of privileged.

Elizabeth Spelman has argued that the very “language of inclusion” and the recognition of “difference” within mainstream feminisms have merely preserved the privileges they claim to challenge (Spelman 1990, p.164). She demonstrates how it is “difference” and not privilege that is generally conceived of as a “problem.” (Spelman 1990, p.182). “Tolerance” of diversity, and recognition of the need to “include” “other” women are in themselves expressions of privilege, and imply the power to be intolerant and exclusive (Spelman 1990, p.182). Such language does not necessarily signify recognition of the need for any significant shifts in power within mainstream academic feminisms.

Thus, while phrases such as “black women’s interests” and “white women’s concerns” are problematic and need to be interrogated and accounted for, they may be necessary in order to articulate experiences structured by racist power hierarchies and to challenge these same hierarchies. Mainstream feminisms have misrepresented or neglected many issues relevant to the lives of black and third world women. By depicting these women as passive victims or as treating them as objects to be analyzed, mainstream feminists, by implicit contrast, have portrayed themselves as active subjects and authorities on the lives and interests of “other” women. Mary John, an Indian feminist, argues that western feminists need to “reconsider what they are out to learn from the distant places they visit” (Gedalof 1999, p.25). “Instead of developing ever more theoretically sophisticated twists on the cross-cultural construction of gender,” John asks, “why not attend also to feminist voices from elsewhere?” (Gedalof 1999, p.25). Not only do these feminist voices need to be attended to; the spaces in which they are given salience and made visible must also be examined. While mainstream feminisms must address issues surrounding race, (post)colonialism and “development,” these are not the only subjects of interest or concern to the extremely heterogeneous group of women who fall under the problematic categories of “black” and “third world.” To ghettoize women in these spaces continues to render their scholarship on a range of issues invisible. While the politics of location and attempts to destabilized “whiteness” represent important theoretical responses, unless rigorously engaged and accompanied with significant shifts in power, these developments may reproduce the dangers associated with racism and universalizing theories, while claiming to do the opposite. Change must go beyond token gestures; simply “adding” black and third world women to reading and course lists or conference panels does not reflect systematic change (Russo 1991, p.300). Such gestures can reinforce identity politics (by having *the* “non-

white” woman speak for “her kind”) while bolstering the false allusion that racism has been “solved” and exclusion is a thing of the past. Change must be reflected through the transformation of analytical categories (Bhavnani and Coulson 2001, p.67), and shifts in agendas and power hierarchies. Without these shifts, mainstream feminism will continue to reproduce theories that, “though unconsciously, risk exacerbating the problems of the third world gendered subject” (Gilbert 1997, p.76) as well as those of black and third world women in the west. Gayatri Spivak has demanded that:

the holders of hegemonic discourse...de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other rather than simply say ... ‘we are just very good white people, therefore we cannot speak for blacks.’ That’s the kind of breast-beating that is left behind at the threshold and then business goes on as usual. (Spivak 1999, p.87)

Significant change requires more than this, and is still very necessary if mainstream feminism is to build on important developments in order to reflect the interests of black and third world women.

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