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Development Paradoxes: Feminist Solidarity, Alternative Imaginaries and New Spaces

By Elora Halim Chowdhury¹

Abstract

In his seminal work *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995), post-development scholar Arturo Escobar likens development to a chimera. My work builds on a sophisticated body of post-development and transnational feminist theory drawing on conceptions of the relationship of representations of development in the Third World to the interconnected webs of various transnational patriarchal and economic dominations that affect, and are affected by, the realities of marginalized communities in the Global South. In particular, I am concerned with how development discourses interlock with global systemic hierarchies of race, gender, class as well as structural oppressions, including uneven global systems of economic restructuring, neo-colonial interventions, and donor-structured development operations that hinder global solidarity and cross-border feminist organizing. Enjoining development debates to cultural texts, I explore what disparate fields such as post-colonialism, feminism, post-development have to offer and enrich the ideas about the conflicted terrain of development discourse.

Keywords: development, post-development; post-coloniality, neocolonialism, transnational feminism, knowledge production, culture

Introduction

The Daily Woman by Niaz Zaman (2005) is a story of contrasts—between rich and poor, abundance and poverty, First World and Third World, old and new, gold and brass, developed and under-developed. Zaman poignantly explores these contrasts through the lives of khalamma, the rich woman, and her domestic help, “the daily woman,” as well as between the daily woman and the Americans who adopt her infant girl. Yet the story is also about something more than contrasts; it is about the dependence of the wealthy and privileged on the poor and the fragility of that illusory bond. The contradictions in that fragile bond can also be read as a critique of common development discourse, here seen through individual relationships that can be expanded to understand power relationships between countries and cultures.

These contradictions are illustrated through the interactions of the daily woman and both the local elites that she works for and the foreigners whom she encounters. In one vignette, the daily woman savors the sweet hot tea with two spoons of sugar she drinks at khalamma's house while observing her employer going without sugar altogether for fear of getting fat—eating and

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drinking only sugarless tea and toast in the morning, cucumber for lunch and only a spoon of rice at dinner. She asks the help to make fat *chapatis* for themselves while she and her husband eat the small ones at the table.

In another part of the story, the daily woman gives up her infant daughter to an American couple who are unable to have one of their own. The “Amrikun” (white man) in the story had spent many years in Bangladesh as a child and now wants to adopt one to surprise his wife. The daily woman’s son was bigger than his twin sister at birth, so she gives up the less nourished girl for better prospects of survival.

The white Amrikun woman—thin and “flat as a dried fish”—takes the large shiny bangles off her wrists and gives them to the daily woman. The daily woman does not want to give the impression that she was selling her baby or exchanging him for gold, but she takes the bangles. She was giving him up because she could not feed him. Later when she takes the bangles to the goldsmith, he laughs and says that they are made of brass. This reminds the reader that “all that glitters is not gold.”

These three examples illustrate the limits of grand discourse of development as benevolent and expose the ways in which humanitarianism can cloak self-legitimizing savior narratives. In the story, khalamma’s life has been brightened by powdered spices and detergents, which lessen the burden of household chores. Yet, the daily woman continues to grind the spices fresh on the grindstone, grateful for the work. The American couple thinks they are doing the daily woman a favor by taking her malnourished child and even throwing in the brass bangles for good measure. The daily woman, on the other hand, pays handsomely for the transaction through her productive and reproductive labor. It is her labor, neither recognized nor remunerated adequately, that benefits the Americans (and khalamma) while these benefactors imagine they are providing her with what they think she needs—fat chapatis, powdered spices, and brass bangles. Post-development scholars call attention to this hidden dependence on the poor as key to re-imagining development and prioritizing reciprocity and mutuality in its place. While notions of care, compassion, and friendship are critical in envisioning alternatives to development, sometimes these principles do not adequately attend to the mutuality and reciprocity that might be integral to creating connections across divides—making the idea of development tainted.

In his seminal work *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995), Arturo Escobar likens development to a chimera—much like the glittering brass bangles in Zaman’s story. My work builds on a sophisticated body of post-development and transnational feminist theory (Escobar 1995; Kapoor, 2008; Crush 1995; Saunders 2002) drawing on conceptions of the relationship of representations of development in the Third World to the interconnected webs of various transnational patriarchal and economic dominations that affect, and are affected by, the realities of marginalized communities in the Global South. In particular, I am concerned with how development discourses interlock with global systemic hierarchies of race, gender, class as well as structural oppressions, including uneven global systems of economic restructuring, neo-colonial interventions, and donor-structured development operations that hinder global solidarity and cross-border feminist organizing.

Fulfilling the promise of development is an elusive goal for the world’s poor, one that is also marred by tremendous loss. Situated in the field of post-development scholarship, using a Foucauldian approach to the study of development, Escobar argues against the positivist tradition of development thought. Instead, Escobar conceptualizes development as discourses, representations and discursive constructions, and as a set of relations between the powerful and the powerless. In Foucauldian terminology, development is, for Escobar, a regime of truth

production. Ilan Kapoor (2008) defines development discourse as “the dominant representations and institutional practices that structure the relationship between the West and the Third World (p. xv). It is comprised of the will to know and of the exercise of power and knowledge to create the Third World as we know it. Jonathan Crush (1995) claims “development discourse is constituted and reproduced within a set of material relationships, activities and powers—social, cultural and geopolitical” (p.6). Discourses of development are established and circulated within and through a knowledge/power nexus that is often called the “development industry” (Crush, 1995, p.5).

The genealogy of development in *Encountering Development* began with the Truman administration in the U.S. as it attempted to restore economic growth after World War II and maintain the dominance of the U.S. in the world’s economic, political and ideological arenas. Escobar considers development a derivative discourse of Western colonialism and imperialism. In his theory, the ability of the West to control the world’s system of knowledge production and to define what counts as knowledge, renders the Third World an object of knowledge with little or no attention to specificities of culture and difference. That is, by scientific means it is possible for Western scholars and practitioners to create particular realities for the people and societies in the Third World. Traditional practices, poverty, hunger, and other socio-economic attributes of societies in the non-West, are conceptualized by agents of knowledge production as the very signs of underdevelopment in need of scientific intervention. Consequently, these signs can be removed through scientific methods, knowledge production and intervention.

For Escobar, development is an imposition of the West with the consent of the Third World elites who have allied with the Western regime of truth. The hegemony of Western scientific knowledge, together with the control of financial resources and political ideology, help proliferate a developmentalist mentality. For people living under this mentality, their customs and knowledge about the environment and natural resources are viewed as belonging to the realm of tradition that needs to be changed or “updated.” The devaluing of customs and local wisdom has, according to Escobar, resulted in the disempowerment of people in the Third World, who have come to see themselves and their cultural heritage in a negative light. Development is a discourse of knowledge production with a claim to truth as well as a discourse of how a social unit comes to see itself and strives to fulfill its self-imagination. Because this process is so disempowering, Escobar emphasizes the necessity of integrating cultural specificities into critiques and methods of development. Attending to cultural specificities would acknowledge the intersections of local and global forces, which aid in co-constructing meanings of development.

The role of the “expert” in development discourse

As a regime of truth, the discourse of development is proliferated through the (re)production of experts and expertise. According to Escobar, the development apparatus converts Third World lives and experiences into a standardized discourse that is predicated upon professional expertise (p. 181). In the complex interactions between dominant development ideology and its practitioners (national and international), certain practices are privileged, and select individuals are the transmitters of privileged knowledge. Northern technical expertise counts as knowledge and transfer of that knowledge from the North to South is at the core of the development process (Parpart, 1995, p. 225). Higher education and professional institutions cater to would-be “experts” through degrees and diplomas in Development Studies and Public Administration. In turn, development agencies’ policies and planning assume that these experts with degrees from Western institutions are better able to solve the problems of the “developing”

world. Expertise and the role of the expert grew out of a belief in the ability of man (not woman, not non-Western) to apply rational, scientific analysis to the “problems” (underdevelopment) of life and to bring “progress” and “prosperity” to humankind. The production, use, and control of this expert knowledge became increasingly refined over the years as the role of the expert (agent of development) became legitimized to control and manage societies through regulatory knowledge systems.

Certainly the Western (white male) expert or the “White Father” as Escobar says, is properly chastised by feminist and post-development scholars for controlling the language of development and using the Third World as a “site” for applying scientific and rational knowledge. An important consequence of the professionalization of development is that the interests of Third World peoples are appropriated by the Western capitalist paradigm (Escobar, 1995, p. 47). At times development is so insidious that Third World elites readily plunder their own countries and believe that their own belief systems are inferior and need to be modernized. “Local practitioners” become part of the machinery as they acquire “legitimized” knowledge and planning techniques to participate in their own development. These categories of Western and local experts are of course not monolithic, and one must not be too quick to accept their role in furthering the modernizing mission of development. For instance, community and grassroots activists are constructed in some development literature as yet another category of local experts, whose knowledge is fetishized and appropriated by the development regime. Whereas the elite expert is maligned for collaborating with the White Fathers, the grassroots expert is valorized as authentic. According to Escobar, in relation to the elite expert, “The rightness of the actions of the harbingers of modernity is corroborated by the fact that the native elite cherishes the modern world—even if their native side might pop up from time to time, for instance, when they become ‘corrupt’ or ‘uncooperative’” (p. 79). He implies here that the native elite is so awed and transformed by the modern world that she or he becomes the local carrier of progress styled and schooled by the framework of Western development. A consequence of this is further hierarchical relations among natives, which hinder collaboration and engender competition. A hierarchy that also obstructs collaboration between women, a point to which I will turn in the next section of the article.

The incorporation of the native into the dominant paradigm of modernity, however, can also signal an enabling failure. No matter how successful Western institutions are in modeling natives after themselves, or the native her/himself is in “mimicking” the Western development imaginary, she or he still remains an “educated Other.” Here, Homi Bhabha’s (1994a) notion of “mimicry” is particularly illuminating. Bhabha cites Jacques Lacan: “Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage...It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (p. 85). Mimicry is a colonialist strategy to produce a class of local elites who can act as the bridge that will aid in ruling/managing the native masses for the colonizers [read: Western experts]. As such, the development industry and its agents, or “New Missionaries” according to Nadine Gordimer, may perceive the educated native as “brown sahibs and memsahibs” parroting the lingo, intellect and even speech of the colonizer [read: Western development agent] (cited in Ford-Smith, 1997, p. 229).

At the same time, mimicry can be read as helping to subvert colonialist understandings of development. Bhabha (1994b) adds: “In disavowing the culturally differentiated condition of the colonial world in demanding ‘Turn White or disappear’—the colonizer is himself caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and

persecution” (p. 120). The generation of a “not quite/not white” population is in fact the projection by the white man onto “them” what he fears and desires. This desire, constituting both deferral and displacement, is what Gayatri Spivak (1988b) calls “what one cannot not want” (p. 9). The emerging figures of colonial otherness has the White man’s “artifice inscribed” onto their bodies. However, “At the edge, in between the [Native] body and the White body, there is a tension of meaning and being” that is both psychic and political that opens up a space for subversion (Bhabha, 1994b, p.121). The tension can give rise to a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle, and a form of power that mocks the colonial authority. The “reformed” native is almost, but not quite the object of imitation; rather, mimicry is at once “resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, 1994a, p.88). When the native subject is perceived as “corrupt” and “uncooperative,” she or he is potentially disrupting history and mocking its power. Though native elites have been incorporated into the dominant development regime and have been complicit in furthering development’s capitalist civilizing mission, the production of a native elite class, or a local expert class, is at the same time, a double-edged system. For, mimicry rearticulates presence, in terms of its otherness, of that which it disavows. Articulation is never simply a repetition of the object of desire [in this case to be like the Western expert]. As Spivak (1996b) has elaborated, even if repetition is the basis of identification, “every repetition is an alteration (iteration)... Thus if repetition alters, it has to be faced that alteration identifies and identity is always impure” (p. 87). The local expert, transformed (but not quite) by Western training, is actually a “hybrid” whose subject position is slippery, living in an “interstitial temporality,” who has the ability to interact with the local and the global in complex ways (Bhabha, 1994a, p. 204). The native expert is both complicit with the dominant power/knowledge regime and at the same time has the agency to disrupt, subvert, and resist.

Feminists and women

My research is influenced by post-development theory because it emerged alongside the integration of feminist and cultural studies into the development field, and was contingent on the “cultural” or “textual” turn in the social sciences. I am further interested in how cultural texts—films, fiction, memoir—(re)articulate and shape ideas about power, global inequality and interdependence. Once reliant on modernization theory, some development scholars turned away from economic models and growth narratives to focus on “the conventions of writing and presentations by which Western disciplines and institutions “make sense” of the world” (Crush, 1995, p. 5). Central to my research is integrating post-colonial and feminist thought in fueling a critique of the notion of development expertise and its so-called objectivity. I follow Escobar and other post-development scholars’ argument that development has not vastly improved the living conditions of people in the Third World. Rather, those considered “underdeveloped” have been re-colonized by development and its discourses. These ideas are powerfully transmitted across literary genres and force us to recognize that regardless of the changing languages, strategies and practices of development, development discourse must be decolonized. That is to say, post-development theorists argue that their work is a necessary “form of criticism of deconstructive practice” (Saunders, 2002, p. 20).

I aim to provide discursive critiques of development discourse in the name of engendering critically informed and reflexive feminist solidarity across borders. To do this, I enjoin key ideas driving the field of post-development, namely, development’s illusory promises, with debates of feminism, post-coloniality and alternative imaginaries. These theoretical traditions I believe have

much to offer in envisioning an anti-colonialist, feminist space that is committed to social justice, self-determination and self-representation across divides of West and non-West. My focus on *Kabul Beauty School*, a travel memoir by Deborah Rodriguez, explores the ways in which ideas emanating from hegemonic development discourse are rearticulated through asymmetrical yet interdependent human interactions and struggles for survival.

Deborah Rodriguez' memoir, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, is an intriguing text that sheds light on this asymmetrical relation between women across the global divide. Examples of these lie in Zaman's rendition of the relation between the daily woman and her employer, as well as between the daily woman and the Amrikun patron—the first a divide of class and the second of nation, colonization and globalization. The controversy surrounding Deborah Rodriguez and her 2007 memoir, *Kabul Beauty School*, makes the topic of this book—the suffering of Afghan women and Western feminist intervention to ameliorate it—all the more fascinating in light of our conversation about women's struggles across borders. It is precisely the kinds of responses and discussions that *KBS* sparks that makes it a dynamic text to explore women's relations across borders of nation, class, culture and imperial histories, as well as a lens to look at how development discourse has become normalized. By Rodriguez' own admission, “We [foreign women] are like another gender entirely, able to wander back and forth between the two otherwise separate worlds of men and women...” (p. 7). A middle aged hair dresser from Holland, Michigan, Deborah Rodriguez' fortuitous journey to Afghanistan is motivated by her attempt to escape an abusive marriage and find direction or a “calling” in her somewhat erratic life, as well as a desire like many Americans in post 9/11 reality to “serve” their country. After a two-month training on disaster relief with a U.S. based NGO, Care for all Foundations (CFAF), Rodriguez arrived in Kabul—the only hairdresser in a group of health care experts, teachers, engineers and agricultural specialists. She soon discovered that her trade was in high demand in Kabul since beauty parlors had been strictly prohibited under the Taliban and the influx of expatriates in the Afghanistan reconstruction industry created a considerable market. That is when the idea of the beauty school was born. “With the idea for the beauty school, it seemed that all my dreams came together. I'd never been satisfied to be only a beautician, even though that's a fine life. I'd always wanted to be part of something bigger and more meaningful—something that gave me the feeling I was helping to save the world” (p. 56).

The daughter of a hairdresser, Rodriguez practically grew up in a salon and went to beauty school at the age of fifteen. Though she did not graduate, in college she met and married her first husband with whom she had two sons. The marriage did not last, however, as she grew increasingly restless for something more than “a sweet husband, children, a good job, a nice house and a car” (p. 58). Without a college degree however, her options were limited. A job as a prison guard came with a benefits package and better pay, but she soon tired of the long hours. Back at her mother's beauty salon however she “decided that I needed more fun. ...so I decided to become [sic] the best party girl in Holland, Michigan (p. 60). Realizing the people she was associating with weren't “real friends” Rodriguez moved on to her next foray—religion. It is then she met a retired man in church with whom she began traveling around the world on “humanitarian projects.” Earlier in the book she shares with the readers that simply traveling for pleasure was never appealing to her as she would invariably “wind up spending time in an area that most tourists shunned.” An interesting anecdote perhaps sheds light into what led her to the kind of work she ended up doing in Afghanistan:

When I went to Jamaica, I was bored with riding Jet Skis and drinking margaritas on the beach of a walled-off hotel, so I grabbed a bus into town. I wound up meeting a twenty-year-old mother with five kids who invited me to her home, where we ate soup made out of not much more than fish bones. I spent the week visiting her bringing diapers and groceries. That was where I felt content (p. 61).

She describes helping the villagers suffering from drought in India in the following way:

I asked them what would help, and they said rice. So I found someone with a truck and got him to drive me to a market in an area where the drought wasn't so bad, and we filled the truck with rice. How could I buy for just one family? Back at the village, we dumped the rice on a concrete slab and called people over using a bullhorn. For about a hundred dollars, I was able to feed the people in this village for three months (p. 61).

Rodriguez entered her second marriage with a traveling preacher because she “liked being married.” This man turned out to be possessive, insecure, and violent. Receiving no support from the church (because her husband had not committed adultery), and afraid he would go after her mother and kids in a violent rage, Rodriguez decided to stay with him, biding her time and saving money all the while plotting her future escape. In August 2001, he agreed to let her enroll in the disaster relief training in Chicago. At this time, Rodriguez learned about Afghanistan for the first time. She describes her reaction to the media footage on Afghanistan in the U.S. at the time, “...I felt like I was leading a life that was nearly as contained as those of the women there....I knew that, for the first time in my life, I was going to the right place at the right time” (p. 65).

The events leading up to, and the way Rodriguez describes her arrival to Afghanistan, shed light on the impulsive and unplanned trajectory of her mission, which in no small way shapes the relationships she develops there as well as the way her “humanitarian” project unfolds. While it is understandable that her actions were at least in part motivated by a desire to help women in distressing situations, many of her actions are also sparked by whim, self-interest and boredom. On the one hand, one can hardly fault Rodriguez for using a high demand skill to develop a blossoming business. However, the substantial interest among western corporations to embark on this particular project and couch it in terms of a “need” and “liberating” for Afghan women raises a number of critical questions. The idea that Afghan women need to be “freed” from a particularly excessive form of Islamic patriarchy and the assumption that “freedom” would resemble western women’s so-called “choice” to determine what they wish to wear and look like has been critiqued in great detail and depth by feminist scholars like Abu-Lughod (2013), Khan (2008), and Sinno (2008). These scholars urge a political and historical analysis of the deployment of women as the barometer of “progress” in the case of western representations of the Muslim world over the essentialized, culturalist analysis available in abundance. In *Kabul Beauty School*, Rodriguez ignores the plural cultural contexts of Afghanistan and instead uses her own ideas of female solidarity, friendship and community—informed by her own social location in the First World—to normalize and legitimize “humanitarian”/development interventions in “other places.”²

² It is important to note the heterogeneous context of Afghanistan, which is informed and shaped by class, location, urban/rural, ethnic affiliation and other variables. In their own organizing work, Afghan women deploy instruments of international human rights and development, and embrace values and norms that are increasingly global. The use of women and gender as indicators of progress pervade transnational discourses and practices in many parts of the

First let us consider the terms under which this school was formed. Deborah Rodriguez returned to Michigan after her first trip to Afghanistan with a keen sense of women's isolation and a promising market for western style women's beauty salons in Kabul. In her typical brash way, Rodriguez called a bunch of beauty product companies and successfully convinced their directors to donate supplies with which she filled a two and a half car garage. Soon she became connected with an initiative by several members of the New York beauty industry that was planning to open a beauty academy in Kabul per the suggestion of Mary MacMakin, an American philanthropist who had lived and worked in Afghanistan for several decades focusing on women's social and economic development. Rodriguez acknowledges, "I was actually relieved to find out that someone else with more clout and connections was working on the idea. I had been doing all I could in Holland but realized deep down that I probably couldn't do such a huge thing all on my own. I quickly joined forces with the PARSA group and pledged the half million dollars' worth of beauty products in my garage and storage unit to the school. ... I volunteered to be one of the instructors at the school, along with a handful of other Western beauticians" (p. 71). The academy was to be housed in the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs.

The Independent featured an article on the Kabul Beauty School initiators where the director of the project, Patricia O'Connor, a British-born marketing consultant described their mission as "We really wanted to help the women and empower them—give them a chance to build a better life for themselves and their families" (Stuart, 2004). A staff of three white Americans and three Afghan-Americans was part of the inaugurating team including a white male manager. From the outset, there were many cultural hurdles bungled by the beauty team. Says Noor Raghi, the male manager regarding the laborers working on getting the compound ready, "They're basically used to men telling them what to do. And American women telling them to do things, and of course, telling them to do things a different way, is not very enjoyable." Liz Mermin, an American filmmaker who made the film *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* suggests that it is not clear what the Afghani women training to be teachers thought of their American bosses. She points to one occasion when Rodriguez announces, "'You know, there are settlers and there are pioneers. I'm a pioneer and if nobody else, no other women are gonna drive in this country, I will.' Heading for a car, she cries: 'Ready girls, rock and roll.'" Mermin confesses that some of the American staffs' attitudes toward their students made her wince, for example "...when they're lecturing them about how they have to change and be bolder. There were times when they said, 'Don't let your children come near you when you're working, this is your time and you have to be focused on your work', and, 'You should be using this equipment instead of that equipment.' They didn't realize that they didn't have any choice." Mermin goes on to explain, "Of course their children were going to be there, and of course they didn't have the equipment—they were being taught how to shampoo and condition, and they don't even have sinks in any of those salons or hairdryers. This 'go in and do it right' American professionalism was, at times, completely inappropriate. On the other hand, I do think that the students really sensed that it might have been based on a naïve misunderstanding and a respect for the standards of the field—they all take hairdressing very seriously."

Global South. A quintessentially modern project informed by a belief in progress through development, feminist interventions have been complicit with its goals even as they have contested the positioning of women within a modernist narrative. Consequently, development is an especially good site at which to trace the emergence of a feminist critical perspective and to see the difference that such a perspective makes. Chandra Mohanty for instance calls for a consistent and radical deconstruction to be applied across the board when using categories such as "Western" and/or "Third World", "developed" and/or "underdeveloped" (Mohanty 2003).

In contrast, in a 2007 interview with the *New York Times*, Rodriguez called the KBS a “safe haven” for the local women who worked there, and a “sanctuary” for foreigners where they could escape from all the “testosterone” on the streets, and bond over each other’s hardships as well as joys. She describes Oasis, her salon—which the beauty school later morphed into—as an equalizer where women from disparate walks of life came together despite differences of race, class and ethnicity over “tea and gossip” and “enjoyed every minute” (Ellin, 2007). The beauty academy floundered after its first three-month training session, according to its director O’Connor because of lack of resources. Sima Calkin, an Afghan American staff however said, “the women’s ministry took exception to suggestions that women should wear make-up and abandon their scarves, as well as to the media attention and the men coming in and out.”

A *New York Times* article sheds light on discrepancies between Rodriguez’ account in the book and the way things developed in real life (Ellin, 2007). According to the six women involved at the school’s founding, Rodriguez “exaggerated her role in the formation of the school.” They even suggest that Rodriguez’ stories of abuse about the Afghan women depicted in her book are not real. Instead of “saving” the school when the Women’s Ministry moved to close it down, they claim she set up her own shop for personal profit. Says O’Connor, “She couldn’t have a for-profit business at the ministry.” Another staff member said, “It makes Rodriguez out to be Mother Teresa. And it’s wrong.” Some of the members of the original team even contacted the publisher about the inaccuracies in the book and called in during a live one-hour interview with Rodriguez on NPR where the interviewer was repeatedly addressing her as the “founder” of the KBS without any apparent correction by the interviewee. Commenting on the tremendous success of the book which includes being listed among *New York Times* bestsellers, selected for a six figure deal by Columbia Pictures, and multi-city book tours, Rodriguez stated, “I wanted the book to be about the women, not about me, I’m just the voice” (Sarhaddi Nelson, 2007).

Let us consider some of the stories of Afghan women’s plight Rodriguez gives “voice” to in her book. The opening chapter described by Hamida Ghafour in a review of KBS in *New Statesman* as “gripping,” features the story of a young woman, Roshanna, whom Rodriguez refers to as her “best friend” (Gharour, 2007, p. 53). *Publishers Weekly* calls this chapter that in elaborate detail describes the various procedures performed on Roshanna’s body—as part of the package of \$250 worth of salon services Rodriguez provides as a wedding gift—to get her prepared for her wedding, and more specifically the “wedding night” as “terrific opening chapter—colorful, suspenseful, funny”. Rodriguez narrates this “dishy but substantial read” by starting with the story of Roshanna preparing for her wedding (Ellin, 2007).

We begin with the parts of Roshanna that no one will see tonight except her husband. Traditional Afghans consider body hair to be both ugly and unclean, so she must be stripped of all of it except for the long, silky brown hair on her head and her eye-brows. There can be no hair left on her arms, underarms, face, or privates. Her body must be as soft and hairless as that of a prepubescent girl. We lead Roshanna down the corridor to the waxing room—the only one in Afghanistan, I might add—and she grimaces as she sits down on the bed (Rodriguez, 2007, p. 2).

True to the title of her book, Rodriguez, an American woman, here literally takes her reader “behind the veil” fulfilling colonial fantasies of disrobing, and consuming the female other stripping her bare for all to gaze at her bodily transformation. Ellen McLarney (2009) states that

the obsession with the trope of veiling in American fashion industry represents “not just some nightmare left over from American involvement with the Taliban, but a reflection of the violence that neo-imperial, global capitalism inflicts on women’s bodies” (p. 2). She talks about the role of American (and British) media in solidifying the connection between the liberation of Afghanistan as one and the same as that of Muslim women’s bodies from the Taliban and the veil and embracing of “aesthetic, cosmetic, and sartorial accoutrements of the new capitalist economy” (p. 3). At once disrobing the Muslim woman to the western gaze, and confirming her freedom from the repressive garment is part of an imperial capitalist project of capturing foreign markets on the bodies of other women as well as a “requisite of the culture of visual media” which acts as an ally to military invasion. This visual imagery serves to expose “the inside story” by going inside the burqa and accessing the other woman to refashion her western style. Only then does she, the other woman, acquire “subjecthood” in western terms—ironically, by donning the very paraphernalia (beauty products) so shunned by western feminists as patriarchal ploys to objectify women’s bodies. Their humanity, concludes McLarney, emerges with their participation in consumer culture.

Rodriguez goes on to narrate in meticulous detail Roshanna’s failed engagement to her first suitor and the terms of the contract of the marriage to the second followed by the successful demonstration of proof of her virginity on the wedding night, which Rodriguez heroically stages over a series of passages voicing the fears of a terrified Roshanna, her furtive and awkward groom, and the anxious mother. Thus Rodriguez’ going behind the veil reaches its climax in a symbolic penetration with Roshanna’s mother “waving the handkerchief stained with my [Rodriguez’] blood” (p. 30). A woman so intimately known to Rodriguez, is surprisingly not recognized by any of her peers and colleagues at the school when interviewed for a *New York Times* article, some of them insisting that these stories were made up (Ellin, 2007). O’Connor’s comment strengthens this suspicion: “These women have been through gazillions of wars and survived all sorts of unbelievable circumstances and this one thing they couldn’t handle?” Brides faking virginity on wedding nights is perhaps one of the oldest and most commonly circulating stories, and it is hard to imagine why Roshanna and her mother would have to rely on Rodriguez to “save the night.” Responding to these observations on both sides, the *NYT* columnist claims, “One thing both camps agree on is that the real concern should be for Afghan women” and not how close to the “truth” Rodriguez’ memoir ultimately is (Ellin, 2007). After all, Rodriguez herself repeatedly iterates that her purpose is to help the misfortunate women of Afghanistan, “I had great pain for the women of Afghanistan...When I heard about the women here, I had to do something” (Stuart, 2004). But, it seems to me quite curious that the publication of her book was met with some degree of hostility and even feelings of betrayal by the same community of women whom she professes to represent. An NPR report states that although her book made her an overnight sensation, in Afghanistan, “...the subjects of her book say Rodriguez and her newfound fame have put their lives in danger” (Sarhaddi Nelson, 2007). These women are being threatened by government officers, armed guards, their own family members, even the landlord of the school’s building. Meanwhile the same report states that Rodriguez “has no plans to return to Afghanistan.”

Another individual story highlighted by Rodriguez is that of Hama, a fifteen year old trainee at Rodriguez’ salon. Because her school received more applicants than it could ever accommodate, Rodriguez was strict about interviewing candidates individually to assess their eligibility, which more often than not seemed to depend on the degree of tragedy they had experienced in their lives. Although she claimed not to enroll anyone under the age of eighteen because they needed to be in school getting an education, she made an exception for Hama whom Ali—Rodriguez’ housemate and business partner—claimed was his niece. Soon Sam and

Rodriguez discover that she was being sexually exploited by Ali, who was not related to Hama but was paying her father in return for the sexual services. In an astonishing turn of events, Rodriguez' son Zachary arrives for a short trip to Kabul, fancies Hama, and offers to be her savior by marrying and taking her back to the U.S. with him. Rodriguez hatches an alternate plan for rescuing Hama: "Then I had an idea that I thought might save Hama, one not quite as drastic as marriage. My friend Karen had been following Hama's story from Michigan through my e-mail updates. She had a lot of sympathy for Hama, since she herself had been in an abusive relationship with an older man when she was a young girl. So we worked out a plan for Hama to fly back to the States and live with Karen. We'd pool our money to cover her expenses and even start a college fund for her" (pp. 194-5). Of course, she did not look in to the process of acquiring a visa for Hama's migration to the U.S. The U.S. embassy in Kabul only issues official visas to Afghans. Her plan remained unmaterialized just as the young girl slowly disappears from the pages of her book—but not before Rodriguez presents readers with details of the sexual molestation taking place—as yet another sad Afghan story of misogyny and suffering.

In fact, Rodriguez chronicles stories of women's suffering at a dizzying rate. She describes the crowd of women in burqas gathered to interview for the beauty school as "a puddle of blue." Finding one of the women, Baseera, alluring because of her appearance, Rodriguez states, "I was ready to admit her into our first class right then and there" (p. 84). After sharing the many stories of repression, when the women were filing out of her house Rodriguez asks Baseera to stay back: "I want to know more about this one" so that she is able to extract all of the fascinating details of her life (p. 86). The women trainees are referred to as "kewpie dolls" and the school as "a hothouse." She says, "...these girls were like flowers that had been stunted and stepped on—but still, never broken. Now they were bursting into bloom before my eyes" (p. 102). In an interview with *Readers Read*, Rodriguez describes her salon as "truly an oasis" and says, "I believe that beauty salons and beauty schools are sanctuaries for women everywhere in the world—in that sense, the Kabul Beauty School is no different. In every salon and school, the beauticians are there to take care of women. The customers let their hair down, quite literally! Lifelong friendships develop" (p.102).

The dominant narrative espoused by Rodriguez in *KBS* surrounds women's hardships and the community they find in the beauty school, as well as how it allegedly becomes their ticket out of poverty and misery. A less prominent, but equally important narrative in the book, revolves around the role of the Western funded proliferation of non-governmental organizations in reconstructing this conflict-ridden nation. It is through these NGOs that Rodriguez gains access to Afghanistan and shapes her narrative of rescue and benevolence. What she calls an "oasis" for the local women is arguably the site of globalization—a microcosm of the integration of Afghanistan into capitalist economic and social "development" processes on the backs of women facilitated and styled by western ideologies and corporate strategies (*Readers Read*, April 2007). Jocelyn Guest (2005) for instance questions KBS' mission in a country faced with 50 percent unemployment, high infant mortality (165 per 1,000 live births), only 30 percent of the population with basic health care, a life expectancy of women at a mere forty-four years, and a national literacy rate of 36 percent (pp. 13-15). The \$1.5m initiative launched by Patricia O'Connor, a marketing consultant, and Terry Grauel, a *Vogue* magazine hairstylist, aimed to make women self-reliant and to alleviate their depression (p. 14). These objectives were to be achieved through learning cosmetology skills and opening beauty salons.

Beauty salons are by no means a new concept in Afghanistan—stories of underground facilities operated by Afghan women even during the Taliban era, and servicing wives of Taliban

officials, are found in Rodriguez' book. These Afghan-style salons were a welcome place for women to gather socially while living under a repressive government that restrained their activities so drastically. These salons were even a space for learning English. What is new however, in the Beauty Without Borders model, is their focus on marketing skills and fostering competition and individual economic gain and mobility. Says Grant, "While these women [trainees of the school] were not exactly unified in their oppression, the debut of an exclusive beauty salon rejects outright the opportunity for female unity. Instead of tackling the social traditions of men who oppress them, many Afghan women are becoming focused on the competition of the growing salon culture" (p. 14). The winner of the first class of trainees was presented with a pair of designer scissors worth nearly \$600. Wages of western-trained stylists far surpass those of doctors and other professionals in Afghanistan. While I do not mean to suggest that Afghans do not need beauty treatments or salons, Grant has a point when she explains that given the historical and political ravages borne by the people of this country, the idea of women rejoining the work force through the so-called "liberating" channels of beauty salons might even be risky and certainly not socially transformative. It was not a choice that Afghan women made, but a profession that was hoisted on them by Western forces who thought they knew what was best for them. Grant claims that O'Connor and her team are equating social change to "prettification," with the measure of women's independence being the ability to buy a \$25 lipstick (as expressed by Rodriguez in an interview with Hamida Ghafour in the *Daily Telegraph*, 2004.) The complex problems faced by Afghan women are reduced to the ability to control their own self-presentation, defined by Western standards. Grant aptly concludes, "And as Afghans indulge in beautification and buy into capitalism, Americans observe and wrongly consider the welfare of Afghanistan on the rebound" (p. 15).

Grant goes as far to suggest that seeing this kind of defiance of the Taliban ideology makes Americans across the globe feel less guilty for the destruction waged on Afghan people during post September 11, 2001 invasion. Such euphoria over the fall of Taliban is naïve given women do not feel safe or secure just because of the symbolic and physical removal of the regime (nor the burqa for that matter) and their lives are still governed by various oppressive and interlinked power structures, not the least of which is Western imperialism. Nor does it signal gender equality. Jennifer Fluri (2008) posits that the "trope of 'saving' Afghan women" resonates with U.S. political initiatives and larger public opinion. She analyzes government documents and hearings both pre and post September 11, 2001 and reveals that despite the repeated iterations by Afghan representatives for the need to focus on long term social indicators such as health, education, security, US representatives time and again brought up the burqa as the issue regarding women's emancipation as an effective mode for amassing public support for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Shahnaz Khan (2008) sheds light on how while it may be true that Afghan women post-Taliban have legal rights previously absent under the Taliban, they are not able to access them because of larger social, historical and political issues which continue to keep them in subordinate positions. Post-conflict restructuring and development processes initiated by the West have yet to recognize these fault lines. Instead they continually reinscribe the binary liberated/oppressed narrative of women's empowerment equally espoused by development discourse. Feminist development studies scholar Richa Nagar (2014) brings home the point that the myriad hierarchies in transnational organizing and the complicated relationships feminists have with their differentially located partners make "feminist empowerment" a contradiction in terms. She suggests that perhaps empowerment ought not be the quest, rather interdependence between collaborators and its mutual recognition.

Post-development, post-coloniality and new spaces

For many post-development scholars, the goal is either to imagine alternatives to development or reject the paradigm altogether. Exposing the very existence of the Third World as “waged, managed, and negotiated around the politics of representation” and as “an effect of the discursive practices of development,” they claim that the Third World had to be invented in order for development to have traction (Escobar, 1995, p. 214). Escobar professes moving away from such tainted roots and calls for alternative ways to conceptualize ways of living and being. He is not averse to critical involvement in alternatives to development practices as long as socio-cultural specificities of local and grassroots contexts are central to the process of alternative-imaginary making.

For Escobar, development has to be unmade and its discursive formation over four decades discontinued from our thought process. He suggests, “in some parts of the Third World, this possibility may already be (in some communities it always was) a social reality” (p. 216). He cautions that such local realities should not be perceived uncritically. “The ‘local,’ moreover, is neither unconnected nor unconstructed as it is thought at times” (p. 179). Moreover, I would add that the “local” is neither uncontested nor innocent; rather, in this post-colonial/post-development juncture, the local is a site of struggle. As Homi Bhabha (1994a) puts it, “The incommensurability of cultural values and priorities that the post-colonial critic represents cannot be accommodated within theories of cultural relativism or pluralism” (p. 173). Instead of an incommensurate universal/particular dichotomized approach, Bhabha, using Frederic Jameson’s argument, suggests, “neither reduc[ing] the Third World to some homogenous Other of the West, nor...vacuously celebrat[ing] the astonishing pluralism of human cultures” (p. 173).

For Escobar, “Development is the last and failed attempt to complete the Enlightenment in Asia, Africa and Latin and America” (p. 221) and post-development includes “defense and promotion of localized, pluralistic grassroots movements” (p. 214). Post-development, is indeed an attractive alternative-imaginary in light of the violences of development regimes. Nevertheless, the “post” too is an ambiguous and incommensurate term. Like post-coloniality, the term may not signal an after, rather mark spaces of “ongoing contestation” (Frankenberg and Mani, 1996, p. 275). Many post-colonial scholars have asked what exactly is “post” about colonialism, given the vicissitudes of neocolonialism. Post-development may signal a decisive shift, but not a definitive one from development.

According to Spivak (1996a), one should approach post-coloniality as the child of rape. She suggests,

Rape is something about which nothing good can be said. It’s an act of violence. On the other hand, if there is a child, that child cannot be ostracized because it’s the child of rape. To an extent, the postcolonial is that. We see there a certain kind of innate historical enablement which one mustn’t celebrate, but toward which one has a deconstructive position, as it were” (p. 19).

Post-development, then, like post-coloniality has to be treated as an enabling violation. One has to continuously remember its legacy and the enabling violation of its emergence, yet at the same time remain wary of it.

A critical reminder from Spivak (1996c) in relation to colonial legacy and knowledge production is the notion of unlearning one's privilege as one's loss (p. 141). Prejudices and assumptions are learned and thus can be unlearned. Privileges stemming from nationality, class, gender and ethnicity can hinder our learning of certain kinds of knowledge. Unlearning that privilege involves doing "homework," developing rage against silences in our histories and allegiances that bind us within certain disciplinary knowledge systems. Once we are open to challenging privilege as loss, we can learn to hear, acknowledge and better understand Other(s). When we unlearn we become aware of what constitutes our conscious, what is it that we are attached to, what grounds our worldviews.

Such unlearning and loss is a reminder that no rigorous definition of other, culture, or local is possible and that assuming explainability obscures the radically heterogeneous. It aids in engaging in a post-development politics that resists co-optation. This kind of engagement would be careful to not construct nostalgic and coherent imaginary of the local. We must be open to accepting "...it [a pristine local community] is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive" (Spivak, 1996d, p. 212). Post-development must not be co-opted into a space for unifying movements because local communities with very different relations to dominant power structure cannot be equalized. While there may be similarities in experiences and heterogeneous cultural difference, which Escobar posits as the root of post-development, it is still a space that is irreconcilable. Post-development must be situated in time and space and the recognition of intersecting axes of domination and subjectivities, political agency, and complex relations constituting subjects and their shifting histories. As Frankenberg and Mani (1996) have stated, there can be no such thing as *The* post-colonial, and by extension, post-development space. There can be only rigorous politics of location and rigorous conjuncturalism (p. 292).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have engaged critics of development, with post-colonial and feminist perspectives which are similarly concerned with hierarchical power relations between First and Third Worlds, arguably the pin that holds the development apparatus together. Enjoining critical development scholarship to cultural texts enable us to see how ideas and praxis that underpin development are rearticulated and given meaning through cultural productions like fiction and memoir. The discussion here, I believe, highlights the very powerful ideas that key scholars like Arturo Escobar offer, such as development as a regime of representation and the processes which discursively normalize certain representations as seemingly irrefutable or as truths and subsequently negate others. The discussion also reveals and complicates fissures in post-development critique, which can fall short of moving beyond the binary paradigm on which development is premised. This limitation in imagination does not fully accommodate the interstitial spaces of resistance and self-actualization that must ground the landscape of post-development space. Transnational feminist analysis can offer important lessons in the imagining of alternative and more just visions.

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