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Mapping Uncharted Pathways in Contemporary Women’s Studies

By Hazel T. Biana

This special issue is a collection of papers presented at the 4th Global Women’s Studies (Hybrid) Conference held last November 24-26, 2022 at the University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom. The Global Conference on Women’s Studies is an annual conference to discuss pressing issues in the discipline. Since its inception in 2020, many scholars, researchers, and scientists from all over the world have contributed to the discussion of the challenges of gender justice at global, regional, and local levels. The papers in this special issue explore theories of gender and sexuality as they investigate various forms of feminist activism. Some of them present new directions in approaching women’s studies. Others provide critical observations and recommendations on ongoing developments in working towards women’s empowerment in various countries across the globe. All these are in line with the thrust of the Journal of International Women’s Studies.

The first paper in this special issue, “Ecofeminist Concerns and Subaltern Perspectives on Third World Indigenous Women: A Study of Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi,” is Bholanath Das and Sahel Md Dilabul Hossain’s illustration of how the indigenous identity of women is silenced in the social orders of gender hierarchies. Interrogating the indigenous women characters in Mahasweta Devi’s works, Das and Hossain discuss the portrayals of marginalized indigenous women and their struggle for survival. A renowned Indian author and social activist, Devi was instrumental in chronicling the injustices done to oppressed peoples. Choosing to fight against injustices suffered by indigenous peoples through the use of research-based fiction, Devi received the Ramon Magsaysay Award (considered the Asian Nobel Prize) in 1997 (Swaminathan, 2016). Although renowned literary critic and feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak (2016) refers to Devi’s indigenous characters as “too noble,” Das and Hossain affirm the essential epistemic contributions of Devi’s tribal women characters to the ethnocentric ecological order. Devi, after all, introduces us to ecoliterate ways of tribal living through her characters, whether through an interconnectedness with the nature goddess Abhaya or a collective consciousness through education and advocacies. Das and Hossain prove that fictional works and characters can be references for environmental education and ecofeminist pedagogy.

“Left-Behind Bangladeshi Wives of Muslim Male Migrants in New York: A Review of Vivek Bald’s Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America” is Prerana Das’ critical review of Vivek Bald’s works. Although recognizant of African American, Creole, and Puerto Rican women’s roles in community building, Bald’s works fail to acknowledge the work of the Muslim Bengali wives that migrant men have left behind in Bangladesh. Das raises the issue of the Muslim Bengali and American women’s gendered silencing, and how their labor has been rendered invisible in establishing a male-dominated migrant network. Using Bald’s gaps as a starting point, Das deconstructs the archival narratives of women in the novel. She also incorporates the examination of transnational Muslim masculinities and migrant precarity in

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relation to Bangladeshi labor and of comparative perspectives of female migration. Das’ paper reveals how Bangladeshi male migration to the United States has impacted women’s socio-economic agency, Muslim identity, and gender relations in both the United States and rural Bangladesh. Das raises the critical issue of the invisibility of women of color in historical texts. The paper is a useful starting point for the restoration and restructuring of forgotten and silenced South Asian histories of women.

Hazamah Ali Al-Harshan’s “Narrative Technique and the Individual Experience in A Saudi Novel: The Case of Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri’s Saliha,” is another venture into fiction, particularly into the world of Saliha. Written by author Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri, the novel Saliha features existential women characters. Al-Harshan’s paper explores the feminist concepts in Saliha and reveals that the women characters portrayed in the novel are self-caring in their quest for identity and independence despite being economically devalued and socially marginalized. Set in the framework of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist existential philosophy, Al-Harshan unpacks Al Mesheri’s women characters and affirms their struggle for existence and redemption from past life traumas. Saliha portrays women’s awakenings, the value of their lives, and the idea that life must go on no matter what. Al-Harshan acknowledges Al Mesheri’s voicing of his resentment against gender and class inequality within Saudi Arabia.

Angela Kahil, in “Angela Jurdak Khoury (1915-2011) as the First Woman Diplomat in Lebanon: Feminism and Education during the French Mandate,” examines Jurdak Khoury’s contributions to the diplomatic affairs of Lebanon. Kahil does so by looking at the place of women in colonial societies, particularly the status of Arab protestant women in Lebanon under the mandate between the 1930s and 1940s. Kahil’s investigation reveals that despite serving as the first woman diplomat in Lebanon and representing her country in the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN between 1946 and 1951, Jurdak Khoury is relatively unrecognized in Lebanon’s history. Kahil, therefore, saw it as necessary to examine the archives of the American University of Beirut and Jurdak Khoury’s documents from 1935 to 1968. Kahil’s inquiry is a noteworthy example of Hélène Cixous’s rallying cry in The Laugh of the Medusa, wherein she prescribes that women should write about women, put themselves “into the text—as into the world and into history” by their own movement (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 875). The feminization of history remains to be a relatively unchartered territory. However, it allows women to reimagine not only the past but an alternative future where women are fully emancipated and extensively participate in global decision-making.

In Gloria Nyambura Kenyatta’s “The Political Participation of Women in Kenya,” Kenyatta reflects on the power dynamics in Kenyan politics. By scrutinizing qualitative and quantitative data, she concludes that despite government efforts to enhance gender equality, structural hindrances prevent women from being included in the political arena. In the 2013 and 2017 elections in Kenya, for instance, despite electing the highest number of women in the legislative and executive branches of government, most institutions did not attain the one-third gender rule (which is a breach of the Constitutional decree). Kenyatta attributes this to the prevailing societal standards, structures of political parties, and gendered violence in the country. She concludes that efforts by both the state and other stakeholders should be coordinated to fully implement programs that support gender equality. The glass ceiling has been a persisting issue not only in Kenyan governmental workplaces but across the world. In more developed countries such as Denmark (Krøtel et al., 2019), Norway (Geys & Sørensen, 2019), and the United States (Yu, 2020), for instance, policies are also being continuously evaluated to ensure the ample representation of women in government. With the same goal of improving women’s representation
in government positions (such as Kenya’s one-third gender rule), for example, Norway’s gender quota reform mandates that the candidate lists for the local executive should be at least 40% politicians of each gender. Despite these reforms being implemented for decades in Norway, there has been no significant change in women’s presence in local councils or shifts in public policies despite increased representation of women in the executive branch (Geys & Sørensen, 2019). Looking at Kenyatta’s study from a global perspective, therefore, reminds us of the need to continuously evaluate gender reform programs and study how we can eventually and successfully break the glass ceiling in government spaces.

Hamid Sajadi’s “Iranian Women’s Movement: Political Opportunities and New Forces” studies the women’s movement’s achievements in Iran since September 2022. Sajadi traces these recent triumphs to the online efforts of students and celebrities which have put maximum pressure on authorities. A stark contrast from when women's activities were severely constrained and suppressed by Iran's political-religious system, Iranian women have bravely pursued their demands owing to the confluence of women, artists, and students. It is an ongoing effort, however, as the Iranian women’s movement still requires a wider coalition within its society and on a worldwide scale. Hamadi asserts that the movement has to be backed up by more influential people who may compel legislators and political leaders to alter laws and regulations accordingly. Sajadi’s paper invites us to take inspiration from the Iranian women’s movement. We should constantly be reminded of how national and international level alliances and support can drive the potential of women’s activism.

Rasis Alanazi, Munira AlHugail, and Taghreed Almeshary’s “What are the Attitudes towards Changing Gender Roles within the Saudi Family?” investigates the attitudes of Saudi men and women toward gender roles within the Saudi family against the backdrop of Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Vision 2030 is a social reform framework that targets the opening up of Saudi Arabia to the world. It likewise recognizes the contribution of Saudi women in the development of Saudi’s society and future. Its reform agenda includes support for women in the workforce through freer travel and work stipulations, programs for childcare, and the championing of women in leadership roles. Alanazi et. al.’s study reveals whether there is a significant gap between the attitudes of men and women in the family after more than half a decade since the reform framework’s launch in 2016. The study reveals that more women held feminist attitudes within the Saudi family as opposed to men who held more traditional and conservative attitudes. Likewise, employed women were more feminist and egalitarian compared to unemployed women, and younger women more feminist in their attitudes compared to older women. Alanazi et al. claims that the study is promising given the “restrictive society, deeply ingrained customs, and associated barriers” that Saudi women have to contend with in their various roles within their families and professional lives. As women’s studies scholars and researchers, the role of Saudi Arabia in shaping the lives of women in the Islamic community is something that we should be critically and optimistically observing. Alanazi et al.’s contribution to women’s studies is that it reveals the changes that long-term socio-economic platforms may have on the family as the basic unit of society.

Polina Lukyantseva’s “Feminism in Modern Japan: A Historical Review of Japanese Women's Issues on Gender” describes the evolution of the feminist movement in Japan by comparing the two waves of the feminist movement. Lukyantseva examines the gender roles of Japanese men and women within the modern Japanese patriarchal society. She illustrates and explains Japanese ideologies, and the Fu-you system. Lukyantseva affirms the shift toward gender equality but observes that old patriarchal traditions continue to be firmly entrenched in Japanese society. For instance, Japanese women were still primarily valued for their traditional feminine
roles as good wives and wise mothers whose essential tasks were to raise children and manage their households. She recommends that Japan should find its own way to feminism, so that women’s empowerment and Japanese traditions can coexist and evolve with each other. Lukyantseva reminds us that feminist movements vary in each society. Her investigation is also reminiscent of Laura Dales’ (2009) work entitled *Feminist Movements in Contemporary Japan*. Dales describes how Japanese women engage in feminism as the practice of instigating social change, wherein these changes are effected on the mundane, everyday lives and routines of women and the roles they are expected to fill. Feminism in Japan can be characterized as “everyday resistances” as “expressions of power,” be it in the workplace or the home (Dales, 2009, p. 4). This type of movement may be seen as a lag behind their feminist counterparts in the West though, but it does not mean that Japanese women are not empowered or feminist enough.

Gloria Nyambura Kenyatta’s “Towards Inclusive Advancement: An Analysis of Gender Equity in Kenya” is an assessment of the notion of gender parity and its function towards inclusive advancement in the Kenyan context. Kenyatta reviews international, regional, and national frameworks on gender equity to which Kenya is a signatory. She also maps out the four major structural impediments to gender equity in the country, particularly poverty, lack of education, uneven access to resources, and retrogressive cultures. The paper argues that for inclusive advancement to be realized in Kenya, both men and women should be empowered for equitable gender participation.

In Hazel T. Biana’s “bell hooks and Online Feminism,” Biana contrasts the fourth wave movement of feminism against the vision of bell hooks’ revolutionary type of feminism. A continuation of her work on hooks in this same journal (Biana, 2020), she asks whether the new society that brought forth “call-out” and “cancel culture” is the type of global transformation or revolutionary change that hooks envisioned. Biana challenges online feminists to be more inclusive to all and proposes a reimagining of online feminism as a less toxic feminism. Feminists should affirm that they can learn from each other (as in hooks’ proposal for a dialogue). Through a combination of online and offline efforts, or a hybrid of feminist activist efforts, feminists can recalibrate their approaches to collectivism. Perhaps online feminism may live up to its potential of revolutionary action and global transformation.

Chidera Okolie’s “Artificial Intelligence-Altered Videos (Deepfakes), Image Based Sexual Abuse and Data Privacy Concerns” is an investigation into AI-altered videos, particularly deepfakes. Okolie discusses the controversies surrounding deepfakes and how they have been used for abusing women online. For instance, women’s faces are masked onto other bodies to create video illusions that enable nonconsensual sexual image abuse and other harms. With the fast-paced developments of these types of technologies, more specific and stricter laws should catch up with deepfake regulation and assign penalties for non-adherence. Okolie’s paper is a timely analysis of deepfake pornography. She makes relevant recommendations on the position of the law, data protection, and further measures for redress, control, and eradication of deepfake pornography.

Ștefania Chihaia’s “The Case for Working with Feminist New Materialisms against the Dualisms that Divide Us” is a theoretical overview of dualisms which lie at the foundation of Western thought. Chihaia highlights the fundamental contribution that feminist new materialisms bring to sociological theory and practice. She delineates the oppressive patterns of thought generated by anthropocentric dualistic thinking by drawing on the works of ecofeminist Val Plumwood, feminist Donna Haraway, and feminist theorist Karen Barad. She analyzes the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy rejected by posthumanists and new materialists and maps the “crisis of reason” that Western thought is confronting. Chihaia offers new avenues for critical...
interdisciplinary thinking meant to re-assess and reconfigure the underlying assumptions of Western systems of thought.

In İnass Abdulsada Ali’s “Feminist Theorizing in the International Relations Discipline,” Abdulsada traces the development of the international relations discipline. She explores whether feminist theorizing has been able to provide a model for the analysis and interpretation of global phenomena. Abdulsada then claims that feminist theorizing has a place among the theories of international relations analysis. Feminism, after all, has introduced a new paradigm for the interpretation of international politics by integrating gender into the process of theorizing. It has also contributed to the international relations discipline on ontological and epistemological levels.

The topics in this special issue are diverse and interdisciplinary. They explore the boundaries of women’s studies. Some examine the lives and works of revolutionary women and women characters. Others critically review the socio-economic, political, and cultural status of women in various countries. Still others evaluate issues that women face in these contemporary times. These papers inspire us to reimagine new possibilities for feminist theory and practice. May they serve as maps to uncharted pathways in improving the conditions of women worldwide.

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