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The Ground Beneath Her Feet: “Third World” Feminisms

By Vasuki Nesiah*

“Good bye Hope”. Those are the last words of Vina Apsara, the heroine of Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*¹. The earth swallows her just as she is about to escape the earthquake by taking flight on a helicopter. Born in India, on tour in North America, Vina Apsara is a much-celebrated pop music icon transacting harmony across frontiers. Rushdie’s negotiation with Vina’s iconic status in the political economy of international pop narrates tectonic changes in aspirations for what ‘the good life’ or indeed, ‘independence’ would mean in the third world’s negotiations with the local/global frontiers of culture and economy. The ground beneath her feet shifts and tilts disconcerts and reorients, it promises the hope of flight only to then plunge an icon into an abyss.

As I found myself reading the novel at the same time I was tasked with writing this paper, the narrative seemed stunningly evocative of both the challenges and passions of third world feminisms.

Rai, the novel’s photographer and narrator, claims that “We find ground on which to make our stand”, and yet, looking back at the lens, we struggle with whether “we are mostly given that territory” (Rushdie 55). As elaborated in the unfolding of this text, the principle thrust of this paper is to advance the argument that third world feminism calls for a re-orienting of our critical energies from merely taking sides in a debate, to questioning the material and ideological lens that interpolates the debate, i.e., the habitus from which we make our stand.

Constituted by the tension between “finding the ground on which we make our stand” and the struggle with whether “we are mostly given that territory”, third world feminisms pursue political agendas interpolated by the cracks and fissures of post-colonial nationhood and internationalized feminisms. The ground of struggle is varied – working conditions and economic self-determination, family and ideology, ethnic conflict and pluralism, sexuality and subversion, disciplinarity and the production of academic knowledge, religion and secularism, human rights and supra-liberalism.

This paper pursues a somewhat non-systematic encounter with these different yet intersecting thematics, in relation to discrepant third world feminist debates on the veil. The complex dynamic attending the iconic status attained by the veil in relation to third world feminism is conveyed in the plurality of issues raised by battles over the veil, including the battle over its iconic status itself. Thus even as this paper itself replicates this absorption with contrapuntal veil debates, it also seeks to foreground those debates that speak to how a fetishistic absorption with the veil excludes or marginalizes other political priorities – in some cases these may be questions pressing economic re-distribution, in others it may be subaltern aspirations not captured by the anti-colonial struggle, in yet others it could be the interrogation of the production of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities, and so on.

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¹ Henry Holt: New York 1999.

Third world feminism may intervene in dominant debates on the veil, but crucially, it may also offer the ground from which to call into question the very terms of that debate. This discussion itself is pulled in different directions by this tension. Thus even when the issues discussed here may strain up from the ground of the veil, the discussion branches out from the dominant debate to explore veiled preoccupations with issues ranging from economic distribution to disciplinarity and the production of knowledge.

Focused on interrogating the terms of the debate in relation to a polyphonic range of preoccupations that have mobilized third world feminism's critical impulses², this paper does not linger with a reading of Rushdie. However, I find his evocation of the ground caving under one's feet powerfully resonates with both the impetus and impact of many third world feminist interventions. In fact, in my (inevitably partial) account, the making and unmaking of the ground beneath one's political positions emerges as a recurrent condition of third world feminist debates. Thus, parts of my paper will engage in the nostalgic replay of familiar riffs - yesterday's debates that shaped the ground of current debates. Other parts of the paper will engage with the constitutive habitus of current debates to interrogate the implications for tomorrow's repertoires.

Agency: Contested Ground

Waving the banner of modernity, in 1958 a hundred Algerian women were publicly unveiled under the aegis of the French army in the redemptive language of progress and civilization. Some thirty years later, the French high court argued that a French school principle's suspension of three French school girls for wearing head scarves to school was a violation of French constitutional norms for religious freedom in a modern, multi-cultural nation. The unveiling's symbolism in relation to the emancipatory mission of imperial power, is paralleled by how 'tolerance' of the veil has emerged as a signal test for the emancipatory potential of legal liberalism.

With the veil itself narrated in terms of a certain exoticized impenetrability of the colonized, the colonial officers' unveiling of Algerian women becomes a symbolic effort to open up Algeria, to make it available as an object of European categories of knowledge and power³. Ironically, in the dominant articulation of this project, it is claims about the enabling of Algerian women's subjectivity that becomes the ground for this effort. In the public unveiling of Algerian women, colonialism sought to constitute Algerian womanhood symbolically and materially as available for colonization precisely because colonialism enabled *true* independence.

The unveiling becomes an avenue through which France works out its own aspirations to modernity defined through and against its colonial relationships. The apparently paradoxical claim that colonialism creates the conditions for independence is a civilizational discourse legitimating French rule as unveiling conditions for an enlightened modernity - not just balancing tensions between France's modernist aspirations and its colonial entanglements, but actually making colonialism the very ground beneath the tracks of French 'progress'.

In this context many third world feminists have argued that the category of 'veiled femininity' sediments in the colonial lens in ways that mobilize a discourse of victimization and passive victims⁴. Thus interestingly, while the French army may have sought to render the veiling of

² I should clarify that my paper doesn't seek to offer a survey of third world feminisms; it is, however, an intervention that locates itself in the debates and pre-occupations of that political ground.

³ The most powerful intervention here remains Frantz Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' in *A Dying Colonialism*, Grove Press: New York 1965.

⁴ Speaking not directly of the veil debates, but of how the subaltern female is figured in debates regarding Indian historiography, Gayatri Spivak urges that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and
Journal of International Women's Studies Vol 4 #3 May 2003

women as a symbol of an antiquated and retrograde culture, many Algerian nationalists sought to instead assert the veil as an accent to a forward looking claim for self-determination, and an active rejection of colonial authority. As the struggle against colonialism gathered increased momentum, veiling practices were augmented in number and significance. The veil emerges as a symbol of the rejection of colonial rule, the articulation, even, of an alternative modernity.

Veiling practices become a fraught site where women's bodies hover in (dis)location between being flattened as the terrain on which we act, and being animated as agents actively engaging the terrain of colonial and anti-colonial struggle. On the one hand, women's bodies are mythologized as the passive terrain of cultural tradition and narratives of progress. Simultaneously, however women's bodies are mobilized as agents, with veiling practices read as expressive of agency, acting for and against these same terrains, be it to defend colonialism, or contest it.

Most interesting however is the fact that many women also resisted invocations of the veil as the ground on which to choose between contesting/defending colonialism. Thus many third world feminists have focused on complicating our analysis of choice by asserting a plurality of meanings for the veil beyond the colonial-anti-colonial axes. Moreover, colonialism and nationalism were themselves internally varied and heterogeneous in their approach to women and therefore the content of the 'womanhood' they defined remained contested and unstable⁵. This heterogeneity is partially alluded to by the way the colonialism-nationalism axes intersected with other social tensions. For instance, the veiling of women also mobilized a particular settling of class privileges on attire symbolically and materially. In many social contexts, being veiled denoted a certain luxury (i.e., women of the 'leisured classes' could don veils freed from the practical demands of work), and a related status (i.e., women of the 'leisured classes' called for a particular protection). Unveiling may have particular consequence for such women because they may be the ones who are primarily veiled. Ironically, the class privilege denoted by the veil has also given profound political reach to the public unveiling of privileged women. A quarter century before the French army's public unveiling of women in Algeria, the prominent and privileged Egyptian activist Huda Shaarawi removed her veil at the Cairo railway station in a spectacular punctuation of her broader campaign pressing the claims of feminism and nationalism⁶.

Yet as many feminists have also pointed out, the meanings of the veil are hardly transcendental. Thus if veiling had denoted class privilege in parts of colonial Egypt, intervening against a different class map of the veil, public veiling was famously taken up in a very different way by middle class Iranian women as a measure of cross class solidarity in the late 1970s. In creating alliances with veiled working class women's protest of the Shah's rule, veiling was for a sliver of time occupying a liminal space contesting the Shah, yet not overtaken by the segment of the Iranian clergy that would later legislate the veil as mandatory.

cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow..."; See 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg, ed.s, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan: London 1988

⁵ Kumari Jaywardane's work on feminism and nationalism speak to many of these tensions; See *The White Woman's Other Burden -- Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, New York: Routledge, 1995; and *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London: Zed Books, 1986

⁶ See Shaarawi, Huda and Margot Badran (translator and editor), *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, Feminist Press, 1986

Debating our conceptual vocabularies

Religion as fetish

If the school of Iranian clergy that gained increased prominence in Teheran in the 1980s sought to pull the veil into the domain of religious conservatism, a parallel effort prevailed in the social science disciplines in the Anglo-American academy in this same period⁷. The dominant strands of both these traditions produced Islam as a singular and uncontested doctrine and institution. In fact, religion was often invoked as a category of tremendous analytical reach in elucidating the ideological and institutional basis for the veil's signification all over the world, from Afghanistan to France. In understanding veiling practices, Islam was, and is, theorized outside of history – carrying a primordial charge, capable, as it were, of over-determining all social relations. For the Iranian clerics and Anglo-American area studies experts operating within this analytical and normative map, protest against the veil is also protest against Islam; as we will elaborate below, this compass is echoed in the dominant strands of human rights discourse.

In the history of Anglo-American political thought, dissidence, and particularly dissidence in the name of human rights, has long been tied to the regulation of the relationship between religion, the public sphere and the state. While concern about persecution against other religions, particularly minority religions and religious sects, was formative in the historical development of liberal discourse of rights, today, human rights theorists have been equally, if not increasingly preoccupied with the way religions treat their own.

For feminist human rights scholarship this has often meant a particular focus on how women fare in different religious communities. In this context, third world feminists have mobilized human rights discourse to speak of the internal heterogeneity, hierarchy and oppression within religious community. Many have sought to complicate our understandings of religious traditions, as themselves constituted by other social relations, internally differentiated, dynamic and contested. Thus some third world feminist interventions have been preoccupied with arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the 'habitus' (including theologically mandated practices, religious affiliation and legal environments) into which women have been scripted.

Simultaneously, others have interrogated the production of knowledge about religion, particularly the very analytical categories through which Islam is made intelligible as a product of disciplinary knowledge. They have argued that the attention to difference and complexity, the very effort to produce a nuanced and accurate picture of Islam that was referred to in the preceding section, could all be in service of 'saving' the disciplinary project – making it more accurate, more comprehensive – an altogether more effective methodological toolbox to 'locate' Islam. Yet this project's naturalized knowledge claims may unravel if we interrogate how knowledge categories such as 'Islamic legal culture' are produced in the first place⁸, if we unpack the distinction between the categories of analysis and the categories of the analyzed. How we inhabit that distinction would tell us how we distinguish between a project aiming towards comprehensiveness, and a project aiming towards a critical engagement. For instance, the former may seek a richer and more accurate account of Islamic community/doctrine/legal culture and such; the latter may focus its attention on

⁷ Marnia Lazreg's analysis of social sciences paradigms of knowledge regarding Middle Eastern and North African women raised my own antennas in this regard; See Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria" in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism*, Routledge: New York, 1990.

⁸ There is now an extensive body of critical work that has taken to task Weberian sociology on this point; More broadly, the classical interrogation of colonial knowledge systems remains, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Routledge: London 1978.

unpacking the genealogies of community/doctrinal language/legal culture etc. that constitute Islam, and its imaginative and material production in debates over the veil.

Working against this ground of the veil debates, some strands of third world feminism have worried that the opposition between secularism and religion has itself worked to constrict and channel the vocabulary of women's human rights onto ever-narrower domains. The historically contingent relationship between religion, secularism and rights discourse in the development of the liberal rights tradition in Western Europe, has slipped into the naturalization of the nexus between secularism and human rights as the dominant conceptual road map that informs much discussion about women's human rights and religious fundamentalism⁹. Thus some feminists (in fact my own preoccupations have moved in this direction) have sought to rethink and reconfigure the putative centrality of secularism in exploring alternative configurations of the relationship between human rights and religion in understanding veiling practices.

Rather than seeing secularism and religion as fixed signposts, structuring the terrain on which we engage with veiling/unveiling practices, I would argue that in many ways it is human rights discourse that shapes the terrain on which it then acts. Human rights discourse itself has a constitutive role in the discursive production of secularism and religion as an overarching roadmap to locate the significance and reach of veiling practices. Moreover, I argue that this framing of veiling practices in terms of the secularism and religion dichotomy has worked to blunt the heterogeneous, dynamic and contested meanings that could shape the political valance of veiling practices. In this context, rather than invoking the conceptual cartography of religion and secularism to situate the veil, veiling practices may be a productive route to situate and unpack genealogies of religion and secularism within human rights discourse.

As I hope to elaborate further in the pages that follow, this effort will help us move from thinking of the work of human rights discourse primarily in terms of whether it empowers or disempowers women's claims, to critically examining how human rights discourse interpolates the very articulation of claims. Or to put it another way, this is to shift our focus from taking sides in a debate, to question the very terms through which the debate shapes our political imagination.

This effort is not unrelated to the project of rethinking the opposition between universalism and cultural relativism. While both sides of the universalism-cultural relativism dichotomy have haunted third world feminism, third world feminism has also pushed against both sides of the dichotomy. On one side, universalism has been unmoored from its claims to stand 'above' heterogeneity and not be fundamentally shaped by the particular, on the other side, cultural relativism has been unmoored from its claims to represent particular traditions by either escaping 'internal' heterogeneity or by positing uncontested boundaries of inside and outside.

Thus if we return to the debate about veiling and school girls in France, the principal who enforced the suspension of the girls in scarves in the name of secular-universalism, was enforcing a conception of the public-private dichotomy in religious life that can itself be grounded in a particular tradition - in fact, a range of distinct and interrelated traditions that are both powerful and deeply

⁹ Although engaged in a slightly different debate, I am persuaded by William Connelly's argument that notwithstanding its effort to further pluralism, secularism itself is often informed by too narrow and intolerant a vision of political life; see *Why I am Not a Secularist*, Minnesota 1999; My thanks to Jennifer Nedelsky for drawing my attention to this text. Also relevant here is Ashish Nandy's argument in the context of the Indian nation-state, that it was Nehruvian liberal secularism that produced religion as ideology, unable to come to terms with the notion of religion as faith; see "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance" in Veena Das, Ed.s, *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1990. While Nandi powerfully unravel's liberal secularism's claims to pluralism, he may also advance a more problematic quiescence about claims to religious 'tradition'.

contested, including liberal statecraft (and the attendant project of French nation building), protestant Christianity (referring not to a religious denomination so much as to a Weberian model of the idealized institutional arrangements for religion under capitalism), ‘enlightenment’ feminism (I refer here to those approaches that subscribe to an emancipatory, even redemptive, vision of crafting a humanist political project around the sex-gender distinction).

These specific genealogies of secular universalism that are (all too briefly) alluded to here subvert the opposition between secular universalism and particular cultural traditions by tracking the very particular traditions through which ‘secular universalism’ (and, paradoxically, its contrast to particular traditions) came to be thought. As the dichotomy between universal norms and particular cultural traditions unravels, the conceptual coherence of the categories ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’ also unravel – to an extent each was defined through opposition from the other.

In unpacking universalism’s foundationalist claims I want to press the argument that the invocation of particular cultures, is not a descriptive but a constitutive effort - a project aligned with and contesting other projects, a *projection* of the very notion of culture. In fact, as we did with the notion of secular universalisms, here we may also gesture to the specific genealogies of the notion of culture - from the notion of ‘culture’ that emerges from the discipline of anthropology (a tradition of viewing culture as an axiomatic category in our pre-analytical conceptual grammar, a tradition forged in the tensions of the colonial encounter)¹⁰ to the notion of culture that emerges from the political tradition of liberal universalism itself. In systematically privileging those institutional sites associated with the liberal state – in the name of an impartial public, reason, and, tolerance – liberal universalism also produced and defined itself against the private sphere, passion, and indeed, cultural particularism¹¹. Here the universalism-cultural relativism dichotomy comes undone in a paradox at the heart of its conceptual compass - human rights aspires to be a set of universalist norms defined in contrast to culturally specific norms, even while universalism emerges as a vocabulary that is constitutive of the very notion of ‘culture’ itself.

However, this is neither to refute the continued (if troubled and contingent) authority of an impossible universalism, nor to understate the power that cleaves to invocations of ‘particularism’ in contesting a putative universalism. It is, rather, simply to assert that Third-world feminism cannot eschew its entanglements with a failed universalism (embedded even in the reach aspired to by the very term ‘third world feminism’), nor its invocation of discrepant particularisms (veiling practices may be exemplary here) in marking those failures. The articulation of a critical alienation from both ends of the universalism-particularism polarity is itself a stance that gains political intelligibility only against a backdrop where third world feminism has itself been mobilized and legitimated by the power of both universalist and particularist discourses.

This is another instance of the tension alluded to in the opening pages of this essay: namely, that the very definition of our political projects inheres in our effort to shape the ground “on which we make our stand” – at the same time however, we struggle with the fact that “we are mostly given that territory”; the ground under our feet is no *terra nullius*.

The identity of economics: Veiling culture

Many third world feminists find the universalism-cultural relativism debate objectionable not only because it is grounded in a theoretically contradictory and politically problematic dichotomy, but, and more importantly in their view, it is seen as a debate that reflects a damaging preoccupation

¹⁰ For an extremely influential interrogation of the production of ‘culture’ in the discipline of anthropology, see James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1986.

¹¹ For a discussion of universalism and particularism in liberal political thought, see Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 1990.

with the 'cultural' that has colonized the terrain of third world feminism¹². In fact, the fetishistic reach of the veil in framing the questions posed to third world feminism may itself be cited as an expression of a turn to 'culture' that has displaced issues relating to power and political economy, at the national and international level.

For instance, debates over the veil have often centered on the ideological understanding of the veil as suppressing female sexuality (the veil as a necessary fortress around the seductive danger of women's bodies), or as liberating women (the veil as enabling society to relate to women as complex human beings, rather than reducing them to their sexuality). Some commentators have advanced the argument that the terms of this debate is itself a problematic indicator of the political preoccupations that dominate much third world feminist debate. It has been suggested that the focus on issues such as sexuality and the cultural production of the veil arises from the orientalist fantasies and demons of the West, rather than the material questions that are central to the lived reality of the vast majority of 'third world women'. Moreover, it has been argued that these demons and fantasies have also ensnared the imagination of the postcolonial intelligentsia and resulted in the triumph of identity politics as the central referent of third world feminism in the academy - or, in a different vocabulary, in the triumph of the politics of recognition over the politics of distribution.

While not letting go of the corrective focus on distributional issues, I would argue that the concern that the cultural and the material occupy contrasting ends of political engagement may itself be a misunderstanding of the identity of economics. For instance, invariably the production and disciplining of sexuality is central to the economics of (re)production at the level of the 'family' (in all its variations), and at the level of the nation-state (in relation to issues such as immigration law). At both these levels a certain normative sexuality is built into the background assumptions of mainstream economic theory and methodology; this is true of theory that is left or heterodox in orientation as well as theory that is neo-classical or conservative in orientation. In fact, the terms of the debate on the veil and sexuality that we referred to in the preceding paragraph may be problematic not because it deals with questions of identity and culture but because the repression-liberation hypothesis it employs fails to attend to the political economy of the construction and disciplining of sexual identity.

Contesting the ground of mainstream economic theory, the work of numerous feminist economists suggests that the production and regulation of desire is in fact a key nodal point of the politics of distribution. The argument that a focus on 'identity' or 'culture' can only substitute for a focus on the economic is an under appreciation of the extent to which these realms are mutually constitutive, and, to that extent, is itself an under-engagement with the material realm.

In addition, the putative distinction between the economic and the cultural is itself another moment in the production of each¹³ – a denial of the culture of economy and the economics of culture. In fact ironically, there is some parallel between the denial of attention to the veil in the

¹² Interestingly, third-world feminist scholarship is often characterized by two parallel conversations – one that is focused on colonial cultural representation and the configuration of postcolonial political space, broadly conceived, and another that is focused on issues such as the role of women in development and economic decision making. Nevertheless, there are some notable efforts to straddle both conversations. One intervention along these lines is the volume edited by Marianne Marchand et. Al., *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development*, Routledge: New York 1995.

¹³ This section bears the influence of Judith Butler's essay, "Merely Cultural" in *New Left Review* 1/227 January-February 1998, pp. 33–44, as well as a range of readings in feminist economic thinking, including the key interventions pulled together in Ferber, Marianne, et.al., eds., *Beyond Economic Man*, Chicago 1993. Judith Butler argues, that ironically, the position that argues against attention to the 'cultural' is itself an approach that doesn't contest capital so much as perform its service - as "the separation between them" (between the 'cultural and the 'material') "was itself an effect of capital."

name of the 'economic; and the cultural determinism that generates the fetishistic preoccupation with the veil.

Before closing, I also want to briefly think through the different grounds claimed and contested in the preoccupation with the veil in the global public sphere today. From George W. Bush to the Taliban, the veil has acquired a new iconic status post-September 11 in the discourse of a range of protagonists on the global stage. Interestingly, the focus on the veil is accompanied by a discourse of the West as standing in contrast to the anti-pluralist ethos attributed to the "Islamic world"¹⁴; The West is projected as 'tolerant', even appreciative of the difference that Muslims, including veiled Muslims, bring to countries like America and Britain.

The current mobilization of the veil as a register of progress resonates with the contradictory impulses that informed the desires and demons of the French army in Algeria in 1958. A fascination with locating the Algerian women as occupying an opaque realm of exotic mystique – an impenetrable difference against which to define French colonial identity, was accompanied, simultaneously, with an impulse to unveil her, to gain 'unmediated' access to her – the power to know and liberate her. Today too the fetishism of the veil operates to deny the brutality of the power embedded in those twin impulses; in the context of the war in Afghanistan for instance, the focus on the veil as a locus of oppression against Afghan women works to displace attention on the impact of the war itself on Afghan women.

Simultaneously however, the emergence of tolerance of the veil as the litmus test of American liberalism, is itself an effort that produces the veil as merely an 'external' garment, a 'private' difference available for normalization within the terms of the liberal nation-state. Thus if a range of actors from the French colonial army to the Taliban mobilized the veil as a matter of cultural or religious determinism, the liberal nation-state in France, the USA and elsewhere locate it as a matter of personal choice, in fact, as the ultimate test of liberal tolerance. In launching a campaign regarding post-September 11th harassment of Muslims, the ACLU filed its first case taking up the cause of a Pakistani-American woman who had to fight airport officials' pressure to unveil at Chicago's O'Hare airport. Treating the veil as the final frontier of difference as it were, and moreover that it is a frontier that can be successfully engaged with by civil liberties and private freedoms, assimilates difference within the terms of liberal citizenship. Obviously this is not an argument for intolerance - rather, it is an effort to unpack how the liberal model of tolerance places all difference on a single currency to better manage its yield, to cabin difference within the terms of the public-private distinctions of the nation-state.

Concluding thoughts

It is significant that the earthquake that steals the ground under Vina Apsara's feet takes place at the very beginning of Rushdie's book; after that we see the ground being reconfigured and re-imagined many times, shaped by new circumstances, enabling new projects. Thus in a very vital sense, the dislocation of the ground under her feet is not the end of hope as such, but the shift to a different place from which to situate her hope.

The debates that we have traveled through in this paper offer some of that same dynamic – again and again, the very terms through which a debate has been structured are called into question, but that questioning itself often generated a new ground, with a new set of fault lines, from which to situate and shape political engagement. The question of veiling itself remains plural and indeterminate in terms of its embodied practice and political valence for the futures that third world feminism will chart. In fact, I would argue that the political potential of veiling and unveiling

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington's thesis regarding the clash of civilizations offers one of the most prominent arguments of this thesis; See *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster: New York 1998.

present an open question even in the most hostile of terrains. For instance, can one imagine Tamil women in Eastern Sri Lanka taking on the veil to contest the current escalation of anti-Muslim policies and practices by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)?¹⁵; Or, to take another possibility from the South Asian region as a reference, can one imagine women organizing to unveil the injustices against Indian women working in the free trade zone as described in Shonali Bose's documentary film on worker's rights, *Lifting the Veil*? The future political purchase of the discourse and practice of veiling and unveiling, the meanings and manifestations of a plurality of contested practices, will emerge in the continued re-negotiation of the ground of distribution and political imagination.

Thus far the shifting fault lines of third world feminist struggles do not suggest any immediate route to a ground less touched by seismic tremors. Indeed, we stand on a ground shaped by the range of debates touched on in this paper and more – and, from where we stand, the horizon does not offer a settled foundation from which to launch third world feminist projects. Nevertheless, from where we stand, we also see that even the fractured and shifting ground beneath our feet evinces cracks of opportunity and hope. Theorizing the implications of Foucault's notion of genealogical critique for our understanding of political space, Wendy Brown has argued that this vision (a vision of 'fracture' as opening up 'the space for freedom') undermines the ground of a progressive utopic teleology or the possibility of a total revolution. However, in engaging always with the interstices of the present terrain it also reduces the political need for such a history or such a revolution¹⁶.

The mapping of third world feminist debate in this paper is also then a politics of fracture – where fracture connotes both the contingency of the ground on which we stand, but also the possibility, that even in the most hostile terrains, we may trip over fissures that open up more promising ground for the futures that we will remake.

¹⁵ Tamil women in the East have veiled in the past to pass as Muslim women in seeking employment in West Asia - yet here the question is whether such passing can also by-pass and contest the anti-Muslim political dispensation that is hegemonic in the East today.

¹⁶ P. 113 of Wendy Brown, in *Politics Out of History*, Princeton 2001.