

Black and White Feminism, a Post-Colonial Vision

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*We have chosen each other and the edge of each other's battles,
the war is the same if we lose. Some day women's blood
will congeal upon a dead planet if we win there is no telling
we seek beyond history for a new and more possible meeting*

Bernice Johnson Reagon

Abstract. *This article will analyze the differences between the needs of all women in the North and in the South. It will examine the exclusion of colored women in Western feminism, although not all-western women are white. It will analyze some domination issues within the feminist movement, its reasons, and the possibilities, within the context of Post Colonial Studies.*

Introduction

The Post Colonial literature had clearly two schools of thoughts or two distinct theories regarding most studied topics, since history seems to have drown differences in the Black and White communities, and time has not necessarily been the best factor to narrow this gap.

The available feminist literature is not exempted from these two distinct theories or two schools of thoughts, that is related to the Black feminism and to the White feminism. Why? Is their history so different and can one speak about what one does not know? Can one speak for a group or just for one person? Is there a real reason or excuse to have ignored one another or dominated a group as in the case of American feminism?

At the IV Forum on Women, in Beijing, China, 1995, the discussions and panels were divided into geographic, historical or cultural groups rather than themes! Should this suggest to us that women from different regions have different needs, representations and sources of oppression and domination therefore different concerns and strategies?

Finally, in a Post-Colonialist period, are there still the colonized people and the privileged ones? Or can we consider that people are narrowing the gap between women from the Third World and Western women, in order to reach

one feminist theory? And, is there a hope towards a United House?

This article is situated in the perspective of the Post-Colonial studies and will only try to point out part of the deconstructing and reconstructing process regarding the issue of a new paradigm in the context of a possible global feminism.

I. Development

Chandra Mohanty suggests that the first project is one of deconstructing and dismantling, the second one of building and constructing and hopefully uniting. These two projects appear to be contradictory but unless we address them simultaneously, Third World feminism run the risk of marginalization or ghettoization from both right and left and from Western feminist discourse.

Arun Mukherjee reckons that groups of women who identify themselves as women of Color, Native women, Third World women, African American women and Black women attacked theoretical constructions of the White Anglo-American and White French feminist theory as being imperialist, racist, Eurocentric and exclusionary. However not all White feminists seem to be aware of this crisis of legitimization, neither all Western feminists are white or middle class nor forgot the oppression caused by class or racism. Therefore, this article will only analyses the differences of the two categories of feminism, considering mainly class,



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racism and gender. Terms like women's oppression, representation of women, sexual differences or gender subjectivity raised the objections by women of color as an exclusionary attention to middle-class White women.

II. White Feminism and Black Feminism

According to Stasiulis, the criticism of White feminism by Black feminists is based on the experience of native migrant, and racial minority women in the Canadian context. These two labels are a sign of the diversity of class analysis and other social categories. The omission of analysis of racism in feminist historiography and social science undermines their potential for building political solidarity. As, finally, in the opinion of the writer, the only possible solution and hope is to build political solidarity, after dismantling and getting discarding the historical prejudices.

White feminism means mainly Western feminists, although not all of them are white, who have ignored or undermined race and ethnicity in the social divisions and identities of the definition of Woman. By contrast Black feminism means a growing literature, everywhere, that conveys and conceptualizes the historical circumstances of Black women and other women of color (Stasiulis, 1991: 282). The omission of women of color from White feminist analysis has in itself been regarded as reflective of the racism and ethnic exclusivity of the White women's movement. For Minh-Ha, the labels of racial differences among women such as Western, non-Western or Third World takes the dominant group as reference, and they reflect strongly the ideology of dominance. So the White feminists may have to come to terms with the complexities and contradictions of power relations involving the intersection of gender, class, and race, while they might be at the same time privileged and oppressed (Stasiulis, 1991: 283). It seems to be contradictory, but it has been possible to belong to a privileged class and to still be oppressed in another category. Several White middle class women, well educated, can relate to experiences of oppression while they accept living in privileged conditions.

Black feminists have criticized the White feminists coming to generalize all women from their experiences. They reject the claims to universality of the central categories and assumptions of White feminist analyses.

Also Black feminists criticize the treatment of the family by White feminists. The family and women's roles as wives and mothers within it, are central to feminist theory. The role of women as performing domestic labor, especially the bearing and raising of children is more problematic for Black feminists and definitely culturally bound. The idea of family, and specially family at large, which could

almost be extended to a complete village like it is often the case in Africa, is mostly unknown from White feminists, or at the most not completely understood.

"...Black women as the least oppressive institution commonly experience the family; rather, it functions as a site for shelter and resistance" (Stasiulis, 1991: 284).

Another criticism from the Black feminists is the concept of female financial dependence on male wage earners, which they regard as racially and culturally bound. More often than White women they have had the sole responsibility for earning income and supporting dependants. In the West, women seem to be either working outside their home, or to be so called mothers at home which is a temporary unpaid position. In many of the Third World countries, women go outside to work whether or not they are mothers and regardless of the number or age of the children, in that sense the term *mothers at home* does not apply in the context nor their culture. As M. Devault explains in her article on *Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint*, language can exclude certain categories therefore we have to use words with greater imagination, in order to integrate rather than to exclude.

It may be considered a failure from the White feminists to define immigration and citizenship as Women's issues. The immigration policies have had a destructive influence in disallowing the preservation of family forms other than the nuclear families. Although it is difficult to draw the line between serious problems due to heavy an inhuman bureaucracy and pure sexism.

Aboriginal women in Canada have echoed many Black feminists by saying that racism, rather than sexism, is the primary source of oppression and therefore that racism comes first. Although in Canada, like in many other places, aboriginal people, men and women, have been receiving unfair treatments, and therefore it would not be correct to assume that all those bad treatments, as often citizens of second class, are necessary due to a sexist or racist policy.

These debates about race and class reflect one aspect of the crisis in Marxism, as it has focused on production and class relation. Debates among Marxists and Marxists focus on the relationship between racism and the development of capitalism. The relationship between race and class, and between racism and capitalism has received in the past many divergent answers. The new era of new social developments provided finally the political context for the development of Black feminism and feminism of women of Color. Since Development followed Colonization, and now Partnership is replacing Development, the door is open for a North and South dialogue and therefore for a new definition of global feminism.

III. Deconstructing and Dismantling

In this process of deconstructing and dismantling, several aspects have to be assessed. The term *Western Feminist* has come from the fact that many scholars have codified. Others as non-western and therefore themselves as Western. The term *Colonization* has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general. The experience and struggles of feminist women of Color has been an appropriation by hegemonic White women's movements. It was in slave society that the concept of *white privilege* gave White women a degree of power over both Black men and Black women. The institution of slavery reveals the privileges gained by the White women within a patriarchal and capitalistic society and the powerlessness of Black women in the same society.

The fact that Western feminists write of women in the Third World is, I think, a political and discursive practice. It can be seen as a mode of intervention into hegemonic discourses. That is to say that those practices are inscribed in relations of power, and therefore are arbitrary. Since Development replaced chronologically the period of Colonization, it is not so surprising to see its hegemonic position today in so many ways. Has development been really the beginning of a new era, or is it only a change of the terminology of the same intervention? The Western feminists cannot ignore the complex interconnections between First and Third world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries.

In much research, the image of the Western women has been depicted as educated, modern, having control over their own body and sexuality and having the freedom to make their own decisions: It seems to appear in the global media as the model that should be exported. In contrast, the Third World women are sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented and victimized. Such a person has been seen as needing help and therefore wanting to be developed by adopting the other model.

It is fairly widely accepted that women in the Third World have been victims of the colonial process and of the development process. Among the many forms of socioeconomic deprivation, African slavery on both sides of the Atlantic has probably provoked the most historical debate (Barry, 1996: 4). The women of color are charging into middle-class White women with having played an exclusionary politics in the structures of the women's movement. They have suggested that many White feminists have appropriated the category women to speak only about middle-class White women's experience (Mukherjee, 1992: 166). When some feminists theorists defended their exclusionary works on the basis that they could not include

areas with which they had no experience with, they came out looking only more racist (Mukherjee, 1992: 168). The hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationship in American society merely took a different form under feminism, which has to be considered, I think, in this section of dismantling process.

The hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationship already established in American society merely took a different form under feminism: the form of White women writing books that purport to be about the experience of American women when, in fact, they concentrate solely on the experience of White women; and finally the form of endless argument and debate as to whether or not racism was a feminist issue (Mukherjee, 1992: 168).

In the process of dismantling the status of postcolonial feminism, we have to address the question of what comes first: race, gender or profession? (Suleri, 1995: 273). Is there an easy definition of postcolonial women?

Cox thinks that all racist phenomena have their roots in the colonial phase of capitalism. The expansion of capitalism via the amassing of vast profits from the enslavement and proletarianization of colored people necessitated the construction of a philosophy of justification. The major function of racism is to divide the working class so that the capitalists can exploit the proletariat more effectively. "... Traditionally the labor of females, domestic work, is supposed to complement and confirm their inferiority" (Barry, 1996: 21). Some analysts such as Bourgeault, insist that the imposition of class, as well as racist and sexist divisions, occurred with the incorporation of Native people into colonial relations under mercantile capitalism in the days of the fur trade. Racist ideologies and practices bolstered colonization of Canada. Slaves were without rights, could not vote, could not associate with White people as equals, could not think of interracial marriage, were not welcome in White churches, and were segregated in Black schools (Mandell, 1995: 40). Many historians failed to describe the brutalities endured by slaves.

Suleri suggests that in the context of contemporary feminist discourse, the category of postcolonialism must be read both, as a free-floating metaphor for cultural embattlement, and as almost obsolete signifier for the historicity of race. While some authors may think it useful to write books like *Talking Black: Thinking feminist*, *Thinking Black*, there is doubt that it would really, at this time, help the problem of dichotomy. History should be regarded as history and present considered as a new era for new partnership. To answer the question what comes first, an other question could be asked, is racism a variable of feminism or is feminist theory a stream of history and therefore racist? From reading such sentence:

"... I belong to a group of people who are having a very difficult time being here...the most important thing now is that Black people are being oppressed and we must work with that", (Reagon, 1983: 540) it could be suggested that feminism has been shaded by some marks of racism.

IV. Constructing and Building

In the process of building and constructing, there are a priority of issues around which all women are expected to organize. It cannot be assumed that the voices of white middle-class women speak and theorize for all women. Women from North and South can be analyzed in one category, as an homogenous group sharing the same oppressions, in a sociological notion of sameness, and fighting the same battles. It can be assumed by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses that women constitute a group, which is everywhere powerless, exploited and sexually harassed. Therefore in this context alliances can be defined and common strategies and policies can be adopted.

It disturbs me equally deeply to read feminist history that only celebrates and rediscovers White foremothers, and does not take into account consideration their collusion with the racist and imperialist forces of the time (Mukherjee, 1992: 169).

In most countries women live in the common context of political struggle against class, race and gender, to name only the most important, but there are obviously many more. For those who suffer these multiples oppressions any kind of analysis which create oppositions as women and Black, women and minorities, women and the colonized people is of course a bitter mockery (Mukherjee, 1992: 170). The terms of doubly oppressed, or triply oppressed, and double or triple minority that we so often encounter in feminist literature, does, in my opinion, accentuate the differences and the exclusion rather than serve positively the analyses.

However, one hopes that this time around, instead of playing the separate but equal game, we can take stock of the past, calmly assess its mistakes and begin to build for a more promising future (Mukherjee, 1992: 166).

In this reconstructing process many women are actively working for anti-racist hiring practices and anti-racist curriculum. As the author of the article *The Divided House* mentioned, she was horrified when she realized that her notions of American literature were racist, not through racist thoughts but because she only studied the texts written by white American men and women and that had never been questioned.

In order to build a more united approach to feminism, a true feminist theory should construct women's studies

courses that introduce students to a diversity of voices should not cast all men the role of oppressors of all women, should criticize racism and reverse sexism.

The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive (Reagon, 1983: 541).

In her article, *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*, Bernice Reagon explains the importance of coalition, not because it is a comfortable feeling but it is a necessary pain in order to find alliances and to survive. Coalition work cannot be done in The Home; it is done outside being dangerous. One cannot rate a coalition success by whether or not you felt good. The women's movement has perpetuated a myth that there is some common experience that comes just because we are women. But if you check the definition of women in the dictionary, you may decide that in some of the women's gathering some women decide to go and see or hear nothing like them. It comes from taking a word like women and using it like a code (Reagon, 1983: 543).

"Then comes what we really are. And at that point you are not a woman. You are Black or you are Chicane or you are disabled or you are Racist or you are White.... Being a woman is not the governing factor to your existence at that moment" (Reagon, 1983: 543).

Feminists will have to change, because Canadian society is changing in significant ways. In Canadian society, it has been demonstrated that the two most oppressed groups of women are Black women and aboriginal women. Again and again the suffering of the Black people has marked the literature:

Mariana Valverde said she is Hispanic in America and White in Canada. I, on the other hand, am Black in America, Black in Canada and Black wherever I am (Simms, 1992: 175). The day must come for all of us to say and to feel that this is our world and to take part in it, as each of us has to believe that we can make a difference.

"Even when we have our Women-only Festivals, there is no such a thing... Today wherever women gather together it is not necessarily nurturing, it is coalition building" (Reagon, 1983: 543).

The question that Stasiulis asks is fundamental: which form of power relations' –racial oppression or class exploitation– is more determinant in providing the basis of social inequality, antagonism, and consciousness within social movements for change? Or which evil-racial oppression or class exploitation- is the most primary (Stasiulis, 1991: 270).

There has been an obvious hierarchy of the oppressed, and until women understand this hierarchy, we will not be liberated from our unique forms of oppression.

"Black women must fight the world because they struggle daily against the racist, sexist, classist power of White men, and against the sexist power of powerless Black men" (Simms, 1992: 177).

Understanding the history, and why there are been these two schools of thoughts or two theories in the Post Colonial Studies, as mentioned at the beginning, rather repeating it or reliving it, will propel women to plan the future in ways that do not replicate the negative outcomes of the past.

Conclusion: The United House

From the above analysis of the problem, it is suggested that not all women, whether or not it is because they are black or white, have similar concerns and needs and therefore cannot have similar interests and goals.

What becomes clearer is that women have several similar basic sociological concerns, which could be studied, at a global level and solutions could be applied locally according to the degree of the problem and adapted to the culture.

Women around the world have a coherent group identity within the different cultures and prior to their entry into social relations.

"It is our hope that the house divided will not survive but will some day be the house united, a house united against racial, sexual, and class injustices" (Mukherjee, 1992: 174).

The issue of the Post-Colonial vision of feminism should have a priority place on the agenda of the XXIst century and begin to occupy a central position in the global awareness. Since the issue of racism has a root, as is mentioned above, in the division of labor in the capitalist context, it should have a solution in the establishment of North and South patternship within a new paradigm of development, and therefore a place in the global economy.

Instead of striving to perpetuate the social differences and, therefore enlarging the gap between Black feminism and White feminism; the global agenda should concentrate on studying the common problems of discrimination of all women of Color and White women in order to finally eliminate Black and White feminism, to build a new global feminist theory.

"It must become necessary for all of us to feel that this is our world" (Reagon, 1983: 546).

As a final comment it should be pointed out that if nothing else can bind the women together as a group, women solidarity can and will; solidarity was obvious and had an active presence in the Beijing conference, as 40 000 women from all colors, with experiences from all over the world gathered together to express common concerns and look for partners in the hope to seek adequate solutions and keep the door ajar in order to build a united house.

This global solidarity, if nothing else, is the hope towards the United House. 



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