

Transnational Feminism: Third World Feminism in the Context of Globalisation

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Abstract

This paper examines the transnational feminism in the third world. Diasporic situations are part of the modern generation with multiple citizenship and multilingual background. Questions of identity is a major issue which is grappled by immigrants. This forms a major trait of all migrant writing-- the feeling of rootlessness, and ambivalence that features diasporic literature highlights such problems within the psyche of the people. Globalisation and its aftereffects in literature is being widely studied today. The concerns of women in the middle East and other non western parts of the world had always been taken up by the academics and activists of the 'superior' races. The condition of the women in Afghanistan had received a lot of media hype following the American War on the country.

KEYWORDS: Transnational, Feminism, Globalisation, diaspora, Third World.

If traditional feminist studies ranged through the three waves of feminist movements, transnational feminism is the order of the day that opts for a conglomeration of female subjectivities that transcend borders and cultures. Instead of vouching for a shared articulation of feminine sensibilities, transnational feminism focuses on multiple narratives and histories of women-black, white and coloured. As against the academic Western feminism that considered itself the referent for the 'other'-lesser communities, Transnational Feminism voices the need to decentralize Western hegemonic power and becomes the voice of the oppressed second half of the world.

If the theory of Postcolonialism is a direct confrontation of nationalistic power building through discourses, feminism is another fight against power structure built through gender discourses. The status quo prevalent is achieved through social conditioning from time immemorial through patriarchal discourse, and this is concretized through the cultural values that 'condition' the minds of every individual constituting society. At the same time, Black feminism as well as the critiques by the women of colour highlight another aspect of women's experiences.

The women of colour, have been thrice victimized: on grounds of race, class and gender. The triaxes of oppression constantly suffocate all women of colour of the third world. Initially the Feminism that spread in the Third World was an exact facsimile of the Western model and served only to bring out a tangled mass of theory and practice, which refused to add up together. Therefore, third world feminists began to speak up for a different stream of thought rejecting the concept of "universal sisterhood". Many coloured feminists vehemently opposed the idea of sisterhood. Thus the 'westernization' of Third world Feminism that took place in the beginning was soon displaced with angry protests against essentialism. This concept took a firm place in academic circles and gained momentum ruling out the idea that two billion females of the globe can be generalized into one category of 'women'.

Critics like GayatriChakrabartiSpivak and Chandra TalpadeMohantycritiques this ideological discursive imperialism and problematizes the accepted hegemonic powers that be that promote globalisation and capitalism. Thus transnational feminism as a concept is a decolonising mission that dismantles the western hegemonic discourse that promoted imperialism in the past and neo-colonialism in the present. Transnationalfeminism basically deals with the need for cultivating connection, toforge an understanding between different groups of women, around the world. It works on an inclusion of womanhood, but stressing on the divergent experiences women face around the world based on their social and cultural circumstances. The common paradigm of race/ class/ gender is called to question here. More elaborately, in the modern economical context of globalization, divergent issues come to the forefront—social activists including feminists deal with these aspects of nationhood, sexuality, religion and capitalism/ imperialism as they voice the concerns of women across the globe.

The unique cultural experiences and situations in different parts of the world raise questions against an essentialising notion that puts together women in a ‘globality of sisterhood’. The ghettoization of women’s experiences by overlooking aspects of race and class boundaries is questioned here. Such an identity politics which grew into prominence in the 1980s challenged the umbrella term of sisterhood that grouped ‘women’ into a unitary category. The term ‘woman’ encompasses within it multiple sections like women of colour/ white and lesbian /heterosexual and poor working woman/middle class academia etc, which confronts the middleclass heterosexual hegemonizing of the term ‘women’ in essentialistic contexts. Transnational feminism states unequivocally that women’s experiences are not essentialistic.

Feminism in the past passed through the first two waves that clamoured for equality and the concept of universal sisterhood. But primarily it spoke for the concerns of the rich Global north(Europe and North America). On the contrary, transnational feminism concerned itself with the problems of the poor Global south(Asia and Africa). With the arrival of the third wave of feminism, the concept of Global Sisterhood of the Western feminist academia suffered a setback. While the white feminists had considered themselves the saviours of the coloured sisters, people like Sojourner Truth, voiced the actuality of their (black women’s) circumstances. Consider, the African women brought as slaves to America.—called the mules of the world. They worked as hard as and even more so than their counterparts.

Sojourner Truth, their spokesperson, says:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? ...I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, no man could head me! And aint I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And aint I a woman? (Busby 38)

The black woman slaves’ life is diametrically opposed to the white upper/middle class lady found in white literature that were modelled after Shakespeare’s “frailty...name[d] woman”. The situation of the African American woman asked to

Speaking of the Globality of Sisterhood, the African critic Ogundipe-Leslie states, “[t]he oppression of Black women is deeply tied to the variable of race in the history of imperialism”(502)). The Black woman’s life thus cannot be easily juxtaposed to the woman in the First World. The poem ‘Letter to a Feminist Friend’ questions the legitimacy of the First world woman exhorting the Black women to join hands against common male oppression. The poem narrates the true story- says that this puts the black women in a confusing position, since their saviors live in a world full of luxuries provided by looting their country and oppressing their men folk in the bargain. The piece justly questions the ‘globality of sisterhood’ concept. The black experience of enduring slavery, colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism comes out in this characteristic simple piece voicing the subjectivity of the women of colour.

The universalized representations on women fail to account for the culturespecific histories and situations of the non western woman. In the Third World itself the patriarchal patterns of domination and the concrete problems faced by women differ according to the varying socio-cultural backgrounds. Trinh-T-Minha puts it comprehensively:

It is indeed devious to think that WOMAN also encompasses the Chinese with bound feet, the genetically mutilated African, and the thousand Indians who committed ‘suttee’ for one royal male. Sister Cinderella’s foot is also enviably tiny but never crooked! And European witches were also burned to purify the body of Christ, but they do not pretend to self-immolation. (97)

Each culture has its own unique social set-up and problems arising from it. They also develop culture specific solutions for such issues, which include the woman question. So the women from all over the underdeveloped world cannot be put into the homogenizing category of the ‘Third World Women’ either.

Hence it follows that women of each culture have to be given attention to and studied specifically. This cultural difference becomes apparent in the narratives of women transnationally. It should be kept in mind that cultural studies bring up a wide range of intersection and at times, lack of apparent intersection, between cultures. It has brought in its wake analogues and parallels that bring out the enormous variety of societal links and contacts. It is interesting to note how bell hooks rejects the need for any homogenizing in feminist struggles: “[W]omen do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond together”(240).

Transnational Feminism: Major Aspects

It is clear that transnational feminists call women a collective group but with certain distinct qualities of their own. They are different from their First World counterparts, but there is a definite meeting ground of the two.

The division of third world feminism from western feminism occurred in the 1980s, wherein the liberal feminist canons that called all women belonging to the same class by means of their gender was questioned. This mode of feminism was branded as ethnocentric and works like Talpade Mohantys, “Under Western Eyes” elaborate the issue. Gayatri Spivak says “white feminism is blind to the epistemic violence that effaces the colonial subject and requires her to occupy the space of the imperialists self-consolidating other” (1995: 268) Their works played a vital role in arguing for a

feminism that spoke for the coloured women which pays attention to specific histories like colonialism. The historical commotion caused by colonisation has in fact given way to the even more sinister cancer of neo-colonialism which is undermining the social, economic and political policies of various nations of the Third World.

“Transnational feminists inquire into the social, political and economic conditions comprising imperialism; their connections to colonialism and nationalism; the role of gender, the state, race, class, and sexuality in the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and unmaking of nation and nation-state.” (ipedia)

Changes in the world economy due to globalisation brought in subsequent transitions in international relations. Historical transitions from imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and migrancy resulted in the need for a transnational feminism. Hence transnational feminism is generally attentive to crosscurrents among nationality, race, gender, sexuality and economic exploitation on a world stage, in the present globalised scenario. Beginning with a critique of globalization, these feminists problematize the hegemony of Western scholarship and power relations. As such, transnational feminist analysis provides an alternative to globalisation studies. Feminists in the international arena critique globalisation in the form of the hegemony of Western scholarship and the polarity of power between the first and the third world. Transnational feminism questions universalising paradigms and the promotion of hegemonic transactions between the Global North and the South.

Economic issues stemming from globalisation is also a major concern in transnational narratives. Many critics like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, consider global capitalism a serious problem, particularly for the Third World women. With the spread of education many women acquire jobs in foreign nations and have become transnational agents. The presence of neo-colonialism/neoliberalism in their working conditions leads to many an object of concern for the women activists. The specific problems of the lower class transnational workers like nannies, ayahs and ex workers have been taken up by various organizations and NGOs. Again aspects of neo-colonialism is a serious issue in the postcolonial context prevalent today. Changes in the world economy due to globalisation brought in subsequent transitions in international relations. Transnational feminists are particularly concerned with the role played by women in colonial histories and lately in the neo-colonial situations that they find themselves in. The social and economic features of neo-colonial environment also deals with the oppression upon the Third world woman by the Western feminist canon with complete disregard for the history and culture of the ethnic communities.

Present Status

In the contemporary scenario, imperialist subjugation occurs under three major heads: a. Gender b. Nationality c. Economy.

Gendered Identity

We find that, the personal choices of the women of the lesser light is not taken into consideration. For instance the hue and cry over the purdah does not speak about the attitude of the majority of the women who wear the burqha. The ban against wearing the burqha in France was recorded as follows:

Transnational feminists have criticized the ban against wearing the traditional Muslim burqa in public that had projected the purdah as “a symbol of subservience” and to “help everyone integrate” through face-to-face interaction, as it allegedly forces the women to conform to "Euro-patriarchal notions of femininity and dress" and does not consider their own personal lifestyle choices (transnational feminism)

Another aspect is the gender roles ascribed by middle class heterosexual women consisting of the mainstream population. The marginalised gender – the lesbian/gay homosexual and the transgender communities also find a platform in transnational feminist activism. The minority rights that they are entitled to have found expression in social and political arena.

Nationality

Diasporic situations are part of the modern generation with multiple citizenship and multilingual background. Questions of identity is a major issue which is grappled by immigrants. This forms a major trait of all migrant writing-- the feeling of rootlessness, and ambivalence that features diasporic literature highlights such problems within the psyche of the people. Globalisation and its aftereffects in literature is being widely studied today.

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Transnational feminists criticise the modern form of imperialism that comes out in that war. The wars fought in the name of human rights were of imperialistic nature viz, the September 11th terrorist attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan by the US were condoned by the world public, since it was under the guise of avenging the country for their ‘vile’ treatment of women. And so these wars were supposedly humanitarian wars conducted to improve the conditions of the women there and it emerged as a modern ‘rescue narrative’.

Economy

The post colonial globalised world, encompassing different types of national economies, has given rise to a large number of women of the global south becoming a transnational labour force. The root problem for such migration in the form of brain drain and transnational mothering is the result of globalisation. Neocolonialism and the consequent rupture of national economies was recorded the aftermath of colonisation. The exploitation of women torn from their native state to live in forced/conditional labour abroad is still under study. The transnational women workers who figure as non-permanent labour force is rising in statistics. Their alienation from homeland and own progeny to gain income from migrant situations under indifferent working conditions are being monitored.

Women Rights Activists speak up for the problem of women such as violence—both in public and private sphere, the unappealing shifts of work and even the discrimination against LGBT. Though labour rights are clamoured for, it is difficult for women of the marginalised sections of society to gain justice against international institutions of governance. In such a context of gender/ marginalised

discrimination, the situation of migrants in alien lands- the offshoot of colonisation and globalisation – deserves special mention.

Significance and Scope

Transnational feminists also double as activists who engage in the discourse for the oppressed and creating a platform for the voicing of marginalised experiences. In short, it is the current position of feminists who have given up universal sisterhood and global feminism for a more inclusive approach. Transnational feminism emerged from the two differing feminist attitudes---that of Third World feminism and Western Feminism. Mohanty illustrates the concept by saying "In this perspective, concrete struggles for survival rather than putatively common oppression or shared identity is seen as the more reliable basis for solidarity, and 'coalition' rather than 'unity' is the preferred political goal"(274). Transnational feminism exhorted the need to build coalitions through solidarity even while asserting that diversities existed between women based on their culture.

It is not to be forgotten that, contemporary gender questions have to be considered beyond state borders. Communication based on technology as existant today can change the lives of women considerably. Women around the globe can link together and form their own coalitions and groups to improve their circumstances. With the culture of globalisation and technology women have the capacity to intertwine their own cultural practices with other political and cultural traditions. The online discussion forums and newsgroups as well as blogs and webpages on social issues has brought out the immediacy of women's concerns around the globe. It has produced an inclusive ambience in such issues bringing on an international connectivity. All cultures involved in these processes of exchange will have the opportunity to engage with alternative cultural possibilities for generating greater gender equality.

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