

## **An Analysis of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes": Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses**

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### **Abstract**

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is an Associate Professor of Women's studies at Hamilton College, New York. She is also a core faculty at the Union Institute Graduate School, Cincinnati. Her works have been translated into German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese. She also co-edited *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* and *Feminist Genealogies Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* and is currently working on a book entitled *Feminism Without Borders: Multiculturalism, Globalization and the Politics of Liberation*. Ms.Mohanty is a member of the Executive Board of Grassroots Leadership of North Carolina, and of Awareness, Orissa, India. She also edits a series of books on "Gender, Culture and Global Politics" for Gaaland Publishing of New York.

**KEYWORDS:** Third world, gender, Feminism colonial

**Introduction:** Chandra Talpade Mohanty is associated with 'Third Wave Feminism'. In the middle of 1990s, there were a large number of non-academic publications by a younger generation of women who had debates on the meaning of feminism for their future life. Their writings announced the advent of a new tone, 'third wave' of feminism from their second wave precursor. The term 'third wave' was popularised by Rebecca Walker in a 1995 article "Becoming the Third Wave" where she encouraged young women to propagate their second wave mothers to join this new feminism. They adopted the word 'wave' metaphor, to clearly state what Deborah Siegel describes as "the oceanography of feminist movement" (Stephen Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon 157). The invocation of the adjective 'third' indicates a link to the previous feminism and a continuation of new ideas. In Deborah Siegel's eyes, the third wave is "overlapping both temporarily and spatially with the waves that preceded it" (158). Many third wavers engaged themselves with popular cultural forms- television, music, computer games, film and fiction. They show a strong female character to interpret consumer culture as a means of empowerment which differentiates them from the second wave.

One of the feminists, Curtney Love, personifies the third wave and its political ambiguity as

She combines the individualism, combativeness, and star power that are the legacy of second wave gains in opportunities for women ... with second wave critiques of the cult of beauty and male dominance ... Glamorous and grunge, girl and boy, mothering and selfish, put together and taken apart, beautiful and ugly, strong and weak, responsible and rebellious, Love bridges the irreconcilability of individuality and femininity within dominant culture, combining the cultural critique of an earlier generation of feminists with the backlash against it by the next generation of women. (160)

Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sarojini Sahoo, although women from the third world, are engaged in feminist movement, criticise western feminism on the grounds

of its ethnocentric nature. They do not take account of the unique experiences of women from the third- world countries or the existence of feminisms indigenous to third-world countries. Jasbir Jain in her analysis of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's Anthology and the Third World Woman as 'Native', has said "the idea of plural or collective consciousness is evident in some of the revolutionary testimonials" (Jain 291). According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, women in the third world feel that western feminism bases its understanding of women on internal racism, classicism and homophobia.

**Discussion:** This essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" is written in the year 1986 by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. This essay criticizes the tendency of western feminists to have a homogeneity and universality among 'third world women'. Mohanty attacks the writers who characterize women as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression without considering the geographical context and historical specificity. She strongly stresses that considering "Third World Women" as a homogeneous "powerless" group often located as implicit victims of particular socio-economic systems" (Mohanty 338). Mohanty writes about five specific ways in which women as a category of analysis appear in western feminist text as victims of male violence, as universal dependants, victims of the colonial process, victims of the economic development and victims of Islamic code. With all these five points, Mohanty's point is that women in the Third World are generalised into a hegemonic group that accepts their stand as victims without taking into consideration the complex interaction of class, race, and culture.

In this essay Chandra Talpade Mohanty anchors all her accounts of western feminism with a select group of texts produced by Fran Hosken (victims of male violence), Maria Cutrufelli (victims of the colonial process), Juliette Minces (victims of the Arab familial systems), Beverly Lindsay (victims of the economic development process), and Patricia Jeffrey (victims of the Islamic code) published by Zed Press under the title Third World Series. Mohanty analyses the works of these authors and this analysis may be useful for the non-western feminists too. In "Under the Western Eyes" (UWE), Mohanty argues the over-generalisation of women which damages the solidarity and the unity among women and divides them into two groups. The first group being western women who are universally liberated, enjoy equality, have control over their body and sexuality and they are superior, intelligent and educated which categorise themselves as 'Third World Women'. The other group being universally educated, victimised, sexually battered and craving for some kind of salvation. Mohanty attacks these writers for categorising everyone under one umbrella. She opines that "sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis" (339). She challenges the notions that over-categorize non-western women without considering the class, ethnic and racial contexts to which they belong to.

Mohanty deconstructs themes that define women of the Third World as archetypal victims. Hosken and Lindsay in their books focus the relationship between human rights and female genital mutilation in Africa and in Middle East. They present all Middle Eastern Women as victims of male violence. Mohanty feels that this kind of presentation freezes women in a socio-political powerless position and make them remain in a fixed place. So what will remain is the dual system. This kind of totalisation is what makes Mohanty argue. This dualism makes women to fall

a prey to the perpetrators or oppressors. It becomes an impediment to realize the feminist vision and hinders the pursuit of gender justice and equality.

Throughout the essay Mohanty gives eye-opening examples from various sources. For instance when she talks about Maria Rosa Cutrufelli 's book entitled *Women of Africa : Roots of Oppression*, it has the same features of Honsken and Lindsay. She writes that since all African women are economically dependent, their main source of income is prostitution. Mohanty is against this kind of distorted world views to which she sarcastically asks whether it will be alright to write a book titled *Women of Europe: Roots of Oppression* and give similar claims as Cutrufelli has published in Zed Press. Mohanty further says that "women from the continent of Africa can be descriptively characterised as "women of Africa". It is when "women of Africa" becomes a homogenous sociological grouping characterised by common dependencies or powerlessness that problem arise." (340).

In UWE, Mohanty tries to detail the complexity of women in the western world, in particular the cultural practice of the literary world which makes the writers universally oppressive. For example the generalization of veiling in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and India, is given because it is a way of sexual control over women and it is also a universally oppressive reality. Mohanty argues here that the veiling in Iran should be looked from different perspective at different historic perspectives. Pirzada women and men consider purdah as "personal security purdah gives to pirzada women" (343). Mohanty attacks when "women are taken as unified "powerless" group" (340). During the 1979 some women used the veil as a means of solidarity when compared to other women who were actively involved in street demonstrations. But in the post-revolutionary period the Iranian Regime forced everyone to veil as a mandatory religious law. The author says it is an intellectually lazy thing to bundle all veiling into a single pejorative category. She also says that voluntary veiling by a small group of individuals was an isolated and a short-lived exception. But in post revolution, the traditional cover for women in Iran is a single universal form of severe oppression on Iranian women. Regardless of the women's personal conviction on veiling, the laws say that refusing to veil is punishable by religious laws which are applied to all Iranian women. Even if a woman tries to negotiate and contest their social and public presence it does not change their nature of oppression. In universal view veiling is a means of oppression on all women throughout the entire Muslim world. There will be some women who refuse to veil but their religious conviction forces them consider themselves as powerless and oppressed.

Another claim that Mohanty tackles is that reductionist approach taken by Juliette Mince who has focuses on women in Arab and Islamic societies. Mince is of the opinion that Muslim women typically knows only to be a mother, wife or sister. This made Mince to generalize the opinion that Muslim women across the world have the same identical vision of themselves. Mohanty's claim is that Mince has failed to consider the class and cultural differences that exist across these societies. She has also failed to detail the practice of the family that has caused the oppression of Arab and Muslim women. This view which is a world view undermines their ongoing struggles, efforts and achievements.

Mohanty attacks Mince first for categorizing all Iranian women as 'victims'. Mohanty substantiates that there are some Iranian women who has manifested in the

women's rights movement and a variety of campaigns one of which is the famous Campaign for One Million Signatures for Change. She says that "however, the recent increase in female-headed households in Latin America where women might be seen to have more decision-making power, ... where life choices are the most constrained economically"(348). Even there is an increase in Iranian women's participation in higher education and this work force strongly indicates that Iranian women are active and determined to stay in the public sphere rather than to limit themselves in traditional roles of homemaking. The recent statistics reveal that from 1990, more than 60% of Iran's university students have been women which even forced the government to limit the seats of admission given to female students. Between 1994 and 2008, the number of NGOs in Iran that were founded and run by women for women went from 54 to 600. Mohanty feels that Muslim women are the most oppressed group. Mohanty highlights Hosken's point of view that "By equating purdah with rape, domestic violence and forced prostitution ...its "sexual control" function as the primary explanation for purdah, whatever the context" (347). She also feels that literary world lack consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the Third World and they should not universally tag them as the victims in need of saviour.

Mohanty also attacks those Western writers who think of themselves to be secular and liberated. She says that this is not the complete picture in the West. Still there is struggle with social ills in the West. According to statistics women in Canada still earn 30 percent less than men and there are some urgent issues like domestic violence, sexual exploitations and female human trafficking in the recent years. Mohanty challenges the binary positioning of the women in the Third World against the women in the West. She deals with the complexity, diversity and multiform extant in both the worlds. According to the western writers they define third world as "under developed and economically dependent" (353), but Mohanty says, "the one has to enable and sustain the other" (Ibid). This western-centric view will not help for women's cause.

**Conclusion:** The essay "Under Western Eyes" informs the reader that the factor that unites women as sisters in struggle is the sociological understanding of the 'sameness' in withstanding oppression, unmindful of the class, culture or geographical borders that they all belong to. Mohanty suggests that when producing texts the scholars have to be mindful of "they cannot be represent themselves; they must be represented"(354).

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