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Response: “Theorizing the ‘First Wave’ Globally”

by

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My response to these three essays that, in distinctive ways, address the appropriateness of the periodization of western feminism into first, second, and third waves as a model for understanding the diverse trajectories of feminism globally is framed by my formal introduction to feminist studies during the contentious late 1980s and early 1990s when diverse fields and disciplines sought to retrieve and/or foreground hitherto ignored or marginalized subjects and subjectivities. Interrogating, and often sharply critical of, the authority presumed by (western) colonialist and racialized discourses that had centered what was in fact a historically specific classed, raced, and gendered subject as the possessor and disseminator of a universal (and universally applicable) knowledge, this interest and the scholarship it generated underscored the politically inflected bases of this (western) authority while drawing attention to the dense particularities of the subjects and subjectivities that, conceived of as objects of this universal knowledge, had been rendered monolithic and stereotypical—without a, or outside of, history and, thus, without agency.

As part and parcel of this interrogation US-based feminist scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Marnia Lazreg, among others, from the so-called third world along with African American feminists, like bell hooks, argued that “white, western, middle class, liberal feminism” had, consciously and unconsciously, both participated in and reproduced colonialist and racialized discourses by, on the one hand, universalizing the western feminist subject as *the* subject of feminism through, not least, its exclusive “focus on gender as the basis for equal rights” (Mohanty “Cartographies” 11) and, on the other,

“discursively coloniz[ing] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World” and of women of color in Euro-America who, by being reduced to monolithic types, were, at the same time, conceptualized as the “Other” of western feminism (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 53-56). Emphasizing the intersectionality of gender with race and class as a counterpoint to, and critique of, western feminism’s singular focus on gender, feminist scholars from the third world and among women of color took on board what was, in effect, a double pronged effort: a deconstruction of the universalizing ambitions of western feminism and an elaboration of geographically, historically, and culturally specific analyses of diverse feminist concerns, constituencies, and modes of engagement, thereby disaggregating the subject(s) of feminism and rendering it (them) plural and heterogeneous.

Feminist scholarship since the late 1980s has, thus, been enriched by a substantive body of work intent on addressing such specificities, where the categories of understanding generated are often those from within the context being analyzed and represented. The three essays in this cluster on “Theorizing the ‘First Wave’ Globally” belong with this effort. Thus, Spurlin’s essay focuses on the intersection of new feminist work from and about Southern Africa and postcolonial feminism as these relate to the specificity of erotic ties among indigenous women in the region. Batra’s, on the other hand, situates the work of a single writer, Ismat Chughtai, within the formative years of the Indian women’s movement, while suggesting simultaneously how it cannot be limited to these years alone given her radical revision of gender roles and sexual conduct that have significant contemporary resonance. And Rosenberg’s mines yet another geographical site—Jamaica—to trace the historical trajectory of Jamaican feminism that in its beginnings replicates “imperialist history” by representing Jamaica’s black, subaltern majority through categories colonial discourses deployed with respect to the colonized. In the process, all

three introduce us to a “new” body of primarily literary material and the social and cultural formations from which it emerges, with Spurlin’s analysis deriving from and framing his reading of Limakatso Kendall’s collection of narratives *Basali!*, which are “by and about Basotho women”; Batra’s an examination of Chughtai’s novella, “The Heart Breaks Free,” in light of legislation pertaining to women’s right to divorce both at the time it is set and its afterlife in more recent legislative decisions; and Rosenberg’s an account of women’s short stories published in the *Jamaica Times* during the period she designates as a form of “early nationalism” in Jamaica.

What brings these diverse analyses together is, of course, their critical engagement with the paradigm of evolution assumed by the narrative of feminism in the west as proceeding along the linear trajectory comprising of successive waves. Both Spurlin and Batra problematize the effort to frame non-western feminisms via recourse to this paradigm (Spurlin more extensively than Batra, worrying as he does about the potentially imperialist nature of such an enterprise). But what is more significant in their reflections is not (or not so much) their negative critique of western feminism per se, but rather their positive elaboration of anti-teleological models through their accounts of (non-western) difference: Spurlin invokes Achille Mbembe’s definition of “African existence,” and “social formations” which are “predicated neither on linear time nor on a simple sequencing,” but are instead “based on a series of *interlocking*, yet paradoxical presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining previous ones.” Analogously, Batra’s “catachrestic reading” of Chughtai’s novella (and place in the narrative of Indian feminism) revolves around the question: “What happens if one particular concern, such as women’s right to legislative divorce becomes important at more than one historical juncture ... [messing a neat] teleology of progress?” Significant for our understanding of the

particularities of specific national, cultural, political, and social formations, Spurlin's and Batra's essays also (implicitly) enjoin a skepticism regarding even western feminism's embrace of the evolutionary paradigm, asking it to reconsider its elisions in producing a teleological narrative in the first place. In this regard, their efforts can be construed as those in the service of what Bruce Robbins, in his interrogation of Mohanty's critique of "easy generalization," has defined as the much-needed task to produce a "difficult generalization" that, while alert to the suppressions and nuances of differences, nevertheless does not balk at, or refuse the charge of comparative scholarship ("Comparative Cosmopolitanism" 174-175)

In a quite different, but no less compelling vein, Rosenberg's critical engagement with the first wave of western feminism is elaborated through an account of early Jamaican nationalism that, while centering "feminist principles," also colluded with colonialist ideologies by reproducing their class and racial hierarchies. Comparativist in its approach in as much as her analysis "look[s] also to the strong parallels with nationalism in nineteenth-century Bengal," Rosenberg's essay also references an issue (or set of issues) that have been a central preoccupation of many non-western feminisms: the vexed relationship of feminism with virtually all hegemonic nationalisms. And this is because most formerly colonized nations have sought to define their much-desired access to modernity through its women as symbols of such access and as a key trope in organizing national self-definition. Women, however, remain objects of, such (self-)definition, and even when they get to articulate their own (self-)interest, this (self-)interest often must negotiate the impediments of patriarchal constraints, among which their sexuality, tied to heteronormative agendas, is particularly an object of containment.

A focus on sexuality—female, male, lesbian, gay—has acquired particular resonance in contemporary feminist scholarship, not least through its critical interaction with queer studies. In

this regard, too, the three essays are of a piece with this contemporary concern. Although Rosenberg's only implicitly references this concern through its notation of Jamaican middle class women's focus on "respectability" as that which distinguished them from lower class and subaltern women, Batra's and Spurlin's are more substantively, albeit differentially, concerned with women's sexuality. For instance, read in conjunction with her analysis of Chughtai's novella (where the various modalities of, and resistance against, control of women's sexuality is explored), Batra's focus on legislative endeavors addressing Muslim women's access to the rights of divorce can, arguably, be read as one which equates women's autonomy with women's *sexual* autonomy. Spurlin's, on the other hand, is entirely centered on women's sexuality—an examination, particularly, of "erotic bonds between women . . . [in] Sesotho culture."

Spurlin's insistence, furthermore, that these "erotic bonds" not be appropriated under the categories of "lesbian" or "bisexual" is an insistence as well on the heterogeneity and *difference* of sexual practices in non-western contexts that western feminism could learn from, not least by refusing or deconstructing "the conflation of sexual *identity* with sexual *practice*." Spurlin's analysis bears significant resemblance to Joseph Massad's critique of what he labels the Gay International ("Western, white, male-dominated organizations" like the International Lesbian and Gay Association and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission); in this regard it articulates with an important strand in current research on sexuality itself as a terrain of contention along the axes of racial, class, and national and ethnic difference. Massad's critique, for instance, interrogates how this Gay International's discourse "produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology," thereby seeking to stabilize a "perceived instability in the desires of Arab Muslim men" (162; 164). Where Spurlin, however, focuses on

“same-sex” desire among (Basotho) women, Massad’s exploration is resolutely focused on (Arab Muslim) men.

In an essay, “The Difference that Difference Makes,” written and published in the late 1990s, my co-author and I had critically examined what we categorized as the *resentiment* within otherwise progressive, oppositional movements like feminism that, post late 1980s when feminist scholarship had been enriched by the difference of non-western feminisms, had led them to abjure invocations of non-western/racial/ethnic difference as simply divisive, a sign of feminism in crisis. We argued, however, that this narrative of crisis was being mobilized to (re)affirm white feminist authority to speak for feminism in general. Thus even as feminism’s subjects had been disaggregated, and western feminism’s colonizing tendencies decentered, concerns related to the persistence of the latter remained and continued to resonate through feminist scholarship addressing non-western/racial/ethnic difference. Spurlin (and Massad) and, indeed, the enterprise of “theorizing the ‘First wave’ globally” the essays in this themed cluster undertake, make us aware (once again) that these concerns have not disappeared, even as they have mutated into other forms. Certainly, they have not disappeared from popular culture in the west where it is still possible to speak of Euro-America’s intervention in places like Afghanistan as an intervention undertaken in the interests of liberating its women.

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