Feminism and Postcolonialism in a Global and Local Frame

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Postcolonialism and Globalization

Many years ago, as a beginning scholar in my field, I decided to write an essay which would respond to the question: “Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?” The term had already been contentiously debated for several years when I decided to enter the fray. “Where should I begin?” I remember asking myself. I decided to follow the advice given to the white rabbit in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: begin at the beginning. In the beginning was the word, so I began with an etymological excavation. The second edition of the *The American Heritage Dictionary* furnished the following definition of “postcolonial”: “of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony” (AHD 1980, 968).

While the definitional “postcolonial” might be considered a fairly bounded creature, the actual usages of the term made it a very Protean, and sometimes Procrustean sort of thing, allowing one to yoke together, sometimes arbitrarily, a diverse range of experiences, cultures, and problems (McClintock 1992). The “time following the establishment of independence in a colony” could thus be used to describe the chapter of history following World War II, whether or not such a period included the still colonized, the neocolonized, or the always colonized. In their introduction to *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Breckenridge and van der Veer argue that, “‘Post’ implies that which is behind us and the past implies periodization. We can therefore speak of the postcolonial as a framing device to characterize
the second half of the twentieth century” (1993, 1). “Postcolonial” was thus being used both “as a literal description in formerly colonial societies” and “as a description of global condition after the period of colonialism” (Dirlik 1994, 332). Clearly, in 1993 when Breckenridge and van der Veer offered their assessment, and in 1994 when Dirlik was offering his, it would have been fair to say that the term “postcolonial” had effectively displaced the focus on “postwar” as a historical marker for the latter half of the last century. But that war is now a distant memory. That brand of colonialism too is a forgotten thing among the generations coming of age in former colonies. Other, more recent wars and operations, other colonialisms, in new guise, claim our attention. A question I had asked in that essay, published in 1995, resurfaced: how long does this postcolonial “condition” last? The King’s ironic advice to the white rabbit, “Begin at the beginning” continued thus: “Go on till you come to the end: then stop”. Where to stop with regard to the postcolonial condition? Some fifty-odd years after the heyday of decolonization in much of the third world, one might say that some things do not end; they become something else, even if we cannot recognize them in their new forms. By now the terminological and discursive baton has been passed on to meet the demands of twenty-first century geopolitical developments. The relay continues as the postcolonial is occasionally supplanted by “globalization” or the term “third world” re-emerges from the cotton wool in which it has been packed for some years. And yet the term “postcolonial” survives, in part because the definition never did seem to contain it effectively in the first place. It survives, moreover, because we are still in the aftermath of colonialism and modernity, in the etymological sense of the new growth that succeeds the initial mowing (“math” stems from the Old English word for mowing), and in the suggestive sense of continuing to perform the calculus after the event.

The longue durée of colonialism and globalization, their relationship to systems of exploitation, and the belatedness of postcolonial theory, indeed any theory, remind us that there is still work to be done. Rather than quarrel now about the utility of this or that term, we would be best served by focusing on how to reap better, more meaningful harvest for our times from the lines of inquiry set in motion by the field of postcolonial studies. Postcolonial studies, often accused even by its own practitioners of having swelled to a point of
meaninglessness, remains relevant, I will argue, because it has attempted to describe and name not a thing, but a process, and it has done so by persistently investigating the colonial and neocolonial logic that is the engine of this process. From the inception of the field, signalled in the publication of Edward Said’s magisterial 1978 study, *Orientalism*, critics have understood that regardless of the literal definition of the “postcolonial” the field has drawn attention to the study of power relations, the power of representation, and the role of discourse in intercultural contact and the making of colonial and now international policy. In the twentieth century, which we might arguably describe as the postcolonial or transnational century, the mounting numbers of global migrants, the lightening dawn of the digital diaspora, growing connectivity, and the facilitation by new supertechnologies of the flow of culture, capital, and labour across the globe have found eloquent expression in Iridium British Telecom’s catchphrase slogan, “Geography is History”. With the further acceleration and growth of transnationalism of an unprecedented size, scale, and scope in the current century, all that was solid continues to melt into air. Postcolonial scholars continue to index those elements of this process that recall the past and predict the present, while speculating on the likely shape of the future. The relevance of the postcolonial method today is the ability to read the past and present together while also placing different locations, the here (usually the first world) and there (usually the third world) on the same cognitive map.

**Postcolonialism and Feminist Studies**

This critical thrust, the ability to read the past and present, and the here and there together, is the mainstay of a postcolonial critique that remains relevant as we try to understand anticolonial feminisms and women’s movements today. Indeed, gender and the woman question have been at the heart of postcolonial studies from its very inception, intertwined with the broad concerns of postcolonialism, but also revising, interrogating, and supplementing them. As Said’s *Orientalism* details, the characterization of the oriental in feminized terms – and by extension that of native, colonized peoples in mainstream colonial discourses – marks the early prominence of gender in the colonial project. Also key to understanding colonial logic is the way in which
the status of native women was used to justify the colonial project as a civilizing mission. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously describes British intervention in the Sati practice in India as “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 297). Partha Chatterjee explains that the colonizers were thus able to “transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (Chatterjee 1993, 118). It should not be difficult for us to recognize this ploy today when we find the veiled Muslim woman used as justification for the casting of the Muslim world as in need of control by the new world order. Nor indeed should we be surprised when the Muslim world (including Muslim women, in France recently for example) responds by defending the veil (or even female circumcision) as a counter to Westernization and its perceived threat to traditional values and Muslim culture. We understand that this is a time-honoured response when we consider that many anticolonial struggles for nationalism in turn used the figure of woman to symbolize the nation, and exerted themselves to articulate a significant role for women in the nation-building and decolonization process. Mrinalini Sinha notes that in India “the Anglo-Indian strategy of using women’s subordination in India as a handy-stick with which to beat back Indian demands for political equality had converted the ‘woman-question’ into a battleground over the political rights of Indians” (Sinha 1995, 45). Anne McClintock observes that “Nationalism is… constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power” (McClintock 1995, 355), a view shared by other feminist critics, notably Elleke Boehmer and Naila Kabeer. Under the circumstances of globalization and the almost complete sway of capitalism worldwide, the condition of women has become a more urgent issue than ever. Gender issues are thus inseparable from the project of postcolonial criticism.

Feminist and postcolonial literary perspectives are occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature. While there is overlap between the two areas, however, tension and divergence are no less in evidence. As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, this conflict arises when feminists perceive that analyses of colonial or postcolonial texts fail to adequately consider gender issues, marginalizing them in favour
of supposedly more significant goals such as nationbuilding, decolonization, or a critique of white imperialism. Anne McClintock notes that “male nationalists frequently argue that colonialism or capitalism has been women’s ruin, with patriarchy merely a nasty second cousin destined to wither away when the real villain expires” (McClintock 1995, 386). “Nowhere, she ruefully observes, has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism” (id.: 386). bell hooks, too, complains that “for contemporary critics to condemn the imperialism of the white colonizer without critiquing patriarchy is a tactic that seeks to minimize the particular ways gender determines the specific forms oppression may take within a specific group” (bell hooks 1994, 203). Postcolonial feminists repeatedly draw attention to the nexus between colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

But if feminist and postcolonial studies remain in a state of tension, postcolonial feminism – feminism congruent with broad postcolonial perspectives – is also apt to be critical of mainstream Western feminism. If lack of consideration of gender in postcolonial studies is irksome to postcolonial feminists, inattention to diversity in mainstream or Western feminism is no less so. Not surprisingly, this critique is often rooted in mainstream feminism’s failure or inability to incorporate issues of race or its propensity to stereotype or over-generalize the case of the “third world woman”. Writing in 1984, hooks bemoans the fact that “white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group” (hooks 1994, 3). Tension, often productive of lively debates, characterizes feminism and postcolonial studies, as well as postcolonial feminism and mainstream Western feminism. No less fraught with anxiety is the debate around postcolonial feminist theory about relative racism and colourism among women of colour.

The implications of these tensions are many: feminism within postcolonialism must confront the dilemma of seeming divisive while the projects of decolonization and nation-building are still under way. Within the broader framework of mainstream feminism, postcolonial perspectives that focus on race and ethnicity may be perceived as forces that fragment the global feminist alliance. Differences within postcolonial feminist work surface repeatedly as the category of “women of colour” is fractured by the politics of location, strife
between minority communities in the first world, women in diasporic communities, and women in the third world. All three fields, moreover, are sometimes susceptible to internal and external criticism for insufficiently addressing class as a crucial factor in relations between people, whether the relationship is one between men and women, North and South, or within groups that have been bifurcated not by or not only by gender or race but by economic status. Postcolonial feminism cathects many of these issues, and is thus a dynamic discursive field. It interrogates the premises of postcolonialism as much as those of feminism, supplementing them with its own particular concerns and perspectives, while in turn being subject to criticism and revision by them.

The Project of Postcolonial Feminism

On a global discursive and economic stage, postcolonial feminist studies is obliged to develop strategies that address contexts which are both local and global, theoretical and practical, while remaining in dialogue both with the first world and the rest. These multiple mandates require that postcolonial feminists remain centred on the problem of representation: who speaks for (or in the voice of) postcolonial feminism, who listens and why; what is the burden and content of postcolonial feminist work; when and where does postcolonial feminist work take place; and finally, what are the future directions of feminist work within postcolonial studies. The relational identity of the field and its evolution in the context of globalization also oblige us to recast the broad question of critical literacy in terms of transnational and transcultural literacy. Those of us who are concerned with women in development must continue to try to understand the broad issue of how to write and read women in contexts that incorporate the material without ceding the responsibility of interventions in academic discourse. In other words, postcolonial feminism must broach frontally the relationship between theory and praxis by identifying the distance between them while also confronting the proposition that theory is praxis. Questions of representation and essentialism must therefore be framed in a theoretical and material context that is both global and local.
In her autobiography, *Meatless Days*, postcolonial feminist critic Sara Suleri recalls a female student at Yale asking her why, in a course on third world writing, she failed to give equal space to women writers. Because, she answers, “there are no women in the third world” (Suleri 1989, 20). Woman, the third world, and the third world woman, she wants to insist, do not exist. What she means, of course, is that they do not exist except in “a discourse of convenience” (id.: 20). The discourse of convenience is also one of convention and custom. In other words, third world women exist as products of language, and the exchange, circulation, and consensual acceptance of what we might call received wisdom. There is thus no authentic third world womanly self that lies (the pun be noted) awaiting discovery, just that which inhabits the language games, plots, and discursive regimes of the social world. Shuttling between those whose power, interest, and desire govern the terms of this discourse, the third world woman, the subaltern subject, disappears. Leading critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak captures this dynamic in her famous proclamation, the “subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 1988, 308). In Spivak’s summation, the “historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” is inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent (id.: 295).

There, in a nutshell, is the chief contribution of postcolonial feminist theory to the issue we have learned to formulate as the problem of the third world woman, or as the woman question. Problems demand solutions; questions answers. The ongoing preoccupation in theory and in practice with this question, this problem, has kept us on the hunt for solutions and answers. The search continues: cherchez la femme. Christina Crosby writes that nineteenth-century British thought was preoccupied with “the woman question” (Crosby 1991). The transformation of “the woman question” into “the woman of colour question” or “the third world woman question” points to an expanding global horizon for preoccupations and anxieties that surfaced powerfully first in a domestic European context. Victorian anxieties about the significance and rights of women developed in a complex and dialectical relationship with an imperial logic which sought to redeem “woman”, “native”, and “other”, even as it was
threatened and challenged by them. In our times, as Spivak observes, “the recoding of the pouvoir/savoir of women in globality is an immense field of study” (Spivak 1995, 12).

Important as it is in itself, “the woman question” also has immense value as a heuristic device that serves to reveal the ways in which a nexus of power, desire, knowledge, and interest collude in the production of scholarship and policies, about women to be sure, but no less in response to woman as a sign of difference. The problem of difference in the world has often assumed an emblematic shape in the idea of the “third world woman”. Revealed and concealed by language, the third world woman, constructed in a discourse of convenience and convention, is sometimes a globally commodified and circulated product to be appropriated for a host of special interests. In the world of difference, particulars give way to undifferentiated conglomerates. The terms “postcolonial”, “third world” and “difference” are sometimes conflated by those with the power of description, and one adds, self-description when it is convenient. The slide between “postcolonial” and “third world” goes remarked. In at least some of its usages, critic Aijaz Ahmad bluntly states, the “postcolonial is simply a polite way of saying not-white, not-Europe, or perhaps not-Europe-but-inside-Europe” (Ahmad 1995, 30). Invested with suggestions of “lack”, “under-development”, and “difference”, the third world, by virtue of nomenclature if nothing else, stands in a clearly hierarchical relationship to the West. Spivak’s meditations on the female subaltern in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, later revised and modified, have spawled a series of critiques and responses that raise central questions in a discussion on women in globality, questions such as: “Who can speak and for whom?”, “Who listens?”, and “How does one represent the self and others?”. The questions that have arisen in the wake of the publication of this seminal essay point to heated issues of representation and essentialism, not least the relationship between the first world intellectual and the third world object of scrutiny.

Kum Kum Sangari argues that the term “third world” not only designates specific geographical areas, but imaginary spaces. According to Sangari, it is “a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single ‘underdeveloped’ terrain” (Sangari 1990, 217). Postcolonial feminist critics have had to
contend with the slippage from woman to an aggregate characterization of third world women as an undifferentiated group uncomplicated by the heterogeneity that characterizes their counterpart in the more developed world. Oppression is then seen as a third world preserve, and third world women reduced to objects of consumption for a developed world which can implicitly and complacently reaffirm its superiority to the rest as the “norm or referent” (Mohanty 1991, 56). Postcolonial feminist critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, and Sara Suleri have variously attempted to rescue the category of “third world woman” from formulaic fixity and invariability, stressing instead a contextual nexus of forces that requires a complex, nuanced analysis instead of “a homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness” (id.: 59). Along with postcolonial critiques about the flattening of difference into predictable shapes, postmodern theories of identity coupled with an understanding of “difference” as the hallmark rather than the exception of any categorical grouping have created an ontological crisis in knowledge production. And yet it is clear that it is hardly possible to dispense with the category of “third world woman” or others like it, in a bid Spivak might describe as “strategic essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Spivak 1996, 214), or with an investigation of the inequities that continue to impact women adversely.

How to walk the fine line between a reductive and predictable sort of essentialism and the continued need for representation? Spivak suggests that one might begin by understanding the two senses of “representation.” “The first is Vertretung, to tread in someone’s shoes… Your congressional person, if you are talking about the United States, actually puts on your shoes when he or she represents you” (Spivak 1990, 108). Vertretung is thus closest in connotation to “political representation”. The other mode of representation, Spivak suggests, is Darstellung. As she explains, “Dar, there, same cognate. Stellen is to place, so ‘placing there’. Representing is thus done in two ways: by ‘proxy and portrait’” (id.: 108). The upshot for those who worry about it, is that it is not representation that is no longer necessary or possible, but rather that a certain sort of uncritical and unreflective representation is no longer sustainable, if it ever was. Notwithstanding her own revision of many of the pronouncements made in the infamous 1985 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak’s injunction still holds
true: “Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 1988, 308). For all that one might agree to this responsibility, however, it has been challenging for scholars to maintain comfortably this double session of representation.

**Public Policy, Colonial Logic, and Capitalism**

When we hear politicians and development theorists declare that India or this or that third world country lives in many centuries at once, we are being alerted to the fact that various segments of the population betray a retarded relationship to modernity, that they have a less than reverential relationship to progressive time which is signalled by adjectives such as underdeveloped, developing, or backward. Colonial domination over the colonized typically manifested itself in control over its space and its time: in its command over space as usable land and territory, its products as raw materials, and over the colony’s borders as administrative units (later to evolve into independent nations, often with colonially designated borders); and its regiment over the time of the colonized both through the production of their “negative history” (David Spurr’s phrase), as well as through a reorganization of their time in clock and calendar units and as labour, a regulation of time by the workday, so to speak. Colonization and development share an investment in spatio-temporal reorganization as engines for manufacturing the identity of those thus governed. In colonial discourse it is the possibility of change within an enlightenment narrative of progress that provides the perfect premise for the *mission civilisatrice*. This early model for negotiating difference is one we might call that of proselytization based on the prospect of successful conversion to the ways and beliefs of what is perceived as the superior faith. In this, the proselytization model is not unlike the colonial one, which also invites the “non-believer” to “be like me [the colonizer]”, except that it operates on the ambivalent additional proviso – “you [the colonized] can never be like me”. Emulation of the ways of the colonizer only emphasizes the difference of the colonized, their modernity always incomplete, always behind that of the colonizer’s. True faith in the colonial model leaves the converted forever in the waiting rooms of redemption, even as an informal sodality of a class of exploitative transnational elites.
united more by economic interest than nation or religion dominates the world marketplace of economic and social capital. Its quest for the domination of the minds, hearts, and pockets of the unambiguously named “emerging markets” proceeds through the simultaneous introduction of democratization, making the link between economic and political liberalism explicit. Progress is thus defined by the attempt to bring the world into one system of symbolic desire characterized by capitalism and its valuation of high-paced transformation, over-production and over-consumption, and “development” or exploitation of resources. Suggestive of a “racism” beyond race, colour, religion, or culture, this formulation of a new world order points to an other for whom we have yet to find the right vocabulary.

The use of terms such as “developing” or “third world” is thus code for that country’s or people’s status as an unfinished nation or unfinished peoples, races, or segments of society. These differences appear fractally, not only as the difference between first and third world, but within them. Postcolonial nations and societies betray their internal hierarchies by identifying their “backward” populations, i.e. those who retard or resist the project of modernity and development. First world nations begin to identify segments of their own population (African Americans, welfare mothers, impoverished cities such as Detroit) as “third world”. The refusal of the puritan ethic of capitalist values, of prosperity and the work ethic, can cast portions of the first world populations as temporally backward and thus spatially conflated with third world colonies. At the same time, those in the mostly third world can cast portions (usually very small) of its populations as a first world within the third world (the 51 billionaires in India making for the third largest contingent of the richest men [sic] in the world, for example). This ideological and class-based difference suggests that resistance to anti-colonial or capitalist logic could be the grounds for an alternative global feminist alliance.

Those, however, who resist the usual logic of development defined by a capitalist credo – the subalterns of the world, particularly women – “cannot speak” in the sense that they cannot be heard or understood because they speak in an outmoded vocabulary, a language inappropriate to this global moment and its logic. Caught within the available register of discourses, woman and her concerns have yet to find an audience even when she does speak. Issues that are directly
relevant to women’s lives – unpaid wage-free labour in home-making or child rearing, the unrecognized and usually illegal labour of sex work, the pressures of family and society, and societal approval of self-sacrificing practices – fail to register meaningfully for policy makers. In the absence of theories that can account for the womb as a site of production or of wageless labour as work that warrants compensation, it is not surprising that contradictions abound in economistic solutions to women’s problems.

Transnational networks that determine policies for women are likely to be located not only in the first world but indeed in its representatives throughout the world, and so will even engage locals in the third world, but this network nonetheless carries the imprimatur and signature of the North, resplendent with traces of its economic primogeniture in the unfolding global history. In the name of transnationalism and global cooperation, the North can continue to determine the fate of the superexploited in the South, while also employing a similarly neocolonial logic in treating the woman question on a domestic national scale, in the case of welfare mothers in the United States for instance where race and class have been activated along with gender as markers of difference and engines of public policy. Global elites can thus collude to produce policies that betray an imperial logic that has yet to be supplanted in transnationality. The network of structures under examination wields enormous power and serves to bolster rather than to check and investigate contradictions and assumptions that underlie the thinking of those in each node within it.

The Global and the Local

Notwithstanding our differences and our political boundaries, within the context of transnationalism and its enhanced possibilities for the flow of culture, communication, labour, capital, and ideology, we live not in three worlds but one. It may be an internally striated world, but it is more interconnected than ever before. I take it for granted that while the temporal categories that typify the postcolonial paradigm are under serious investigation, no one would argue that historical development or time do not matter or indeed, that place does not matter. The question, then, is, how do time (history) and place (geography) matter? Those interested in reconfiguring area studies argue that the
world has changed under the aegis of the latest phase of capital, that areas were arbitrary units that never did offer the static unity that the cold war pragmatic objectives were forced to assume, that the regional interests of individual areas are much more likely to link cross-regionally than contiguously, and that the local is itself defined fundamentally by the global. Those who argue that locations matter, on the other hand, contend that it is important to study the vernacular and local conjugations of the global, that the local is the very fabric of global capitalism, that the local is not merely reflective of, but is global process, and indeed that new meanings and possibilities for political agency emerge in the very process of the movement of the global into particular locations, rendering a preemptive theory of globalization premature and inadequate. At the same time, however, epistemic violence continues in the increasingly dominant structural systems that continue to be vectored along the national interests of powerful nations (usually in the first world) with supranational coalitions (the first world in mostly third world emergent superpowers such as India and China).

In the final part of this article, I would like to discuss two case studies which illustrate the double mandate we must accept as post-colonial feminist scholars: first, we must struggle to understand the forces of global capitalism in a reckoning of the local; second, we must also contend with the “foxholes of history” (novelist Amitav Ghosh’s phrase) where the local retains its identity not so much as independent from global forces but as distinct within it, and demanding understanding on its own terms. These case studies also highlight the ways in which our so-called “knowledge” about the condition of women is already limited by forces that are global at times and local at others, and often overlapping.

**The Subaltern Cannot Speak**

I rely for my first illustration on a significant study on the impact of globalization on vernacular writing by women in India (unpublished talk entitled “The Dissenting Feminist Voice in a Globalised Marketplace”) by feminist publisher and critic Ritu Menon, whose publishing house, Kali for Women, was the first independent publisher to begin to highlight and broadcast women’s issues in India to a broad audience
that has often included international feminists. This study demonstrates how the forces of the marketplace control both the dissemination and the production of knowledge even when knowledge appears to be locally produced.

Her study demonstrates how the forces of the marketplace control both the dissemination and the *production* of knowledge even when it appears to be locally produced. She points first to the global primacy of English – with a billion and half speakers worldwide and official or special status in some 75 countries – and its threats to non-English language productions by women writers, not least because younger people are losing their mother tongues and, moreover, the reading habit in favor of television and other globally shared entertainment. The next time we come across writing by women from that part of the world, in their own words, so to speak, we might consider which words in which language they have cast aside before they began to write in a more marketable language for their experiences. All languages mediate, we might argue, but Menon then turns to the ways in which the market determines not only the language in which experience might be rendered but also what can be said. Market considerations, initially fulfilling the promise of broader dissemination, begin to exert pressure on women’s writing. Menon laments the aftermath:

Gradually, literature that sensationalizes women’s issues begins to replace the writing that earlier attempted to explore and lay bare the patriarchal structures within which women’s lives are lived; while issues that women struggled to legitimize and bring within the parameters of the literary – rape, sexuality, housework and reproductive labour – are subject to market control.

Menon explains that “The greater part of feminist writing today – feminist defined in broad terms and encompassing theoretical and critical work; social science research; creative writing, and general interest non-fiction – is published by academic, university and trade presses, short on “politics” as we understand it in the movement, but long on marketing, financial capacity and sales.”

At the end of the day then, assuming that women writers should have the freedom to choose publishers who offer bigger markets and better publicity, for all the speaking there is still silence about everything that the market disallows. We might think of this as a kind of cen-
sorship we have not yet learned to recognize in that it muffles what can be said while encouraging women to speak. In other words, it celebrates a self that is the product of repression, control, and denial.

My second case study draws from my own study on HIV/AIDS prevention work in India. In this case, feminist groups (not quite a movement) work locally and in unexpectedly successful ways, operating on local, regional, and embedded knowledge, but their strategies cannot be easily translated into a global or even national discourse, nor disseminated successfully by it.

In the course of my investigation, I travelled throughout Tamil Nadu, the first site of a state-based HIV/AIDS prevention program funded by US government funds in India. It was no surprise to learn that although the suffering was distributed, women were bearing the brunt of the epidemic because of their vulnerability, their dependence, and social disenfranchisement. They were not only more susceptible for reasons of their physical and biological vulnerability to infection but also because neither the state, nor society, nor indeed the funding agencies were able to hear or understand their situation. Or if they heard it, they were not willing to confront the huge and often shared local and global problem of patriarchal sexism or a reality-blind moral Puritanism among international funders as well as local guardians of morality. Societal condemnation of sex work, persecution by police and other societal agents of illegal activities, and donor resistance to recognizing sex workers as legitimate recipients of understanding, aid, and relief conspired to compound their abjection. Local disavowal of the reality and problems of sex work, not least of which is societal complicity with it, underscored the alliance of global, statist, and patriarchal networks. Domestic abuse and violence toward women, their subjection to forced, unprotected sex legal unions, and the refusal by state and US-funded NGOs to address issues that intervened in local culture suggested that these issues lay, without acknowledgement, on the same spectrum as the problems that attend those who make a living from prostitution. State agents as well as NGO workers and funders, many of them men, many of them used to the advantages of a male-dominant societal structure, were not likely to challenge structures that were in their interest.

These problems colluded with a general reluctance to address the syndemic, societal, non-epidemiological problems that were fuelling the
epidemic, in part because funding agencies tend to work on a time-line and a calculus of measurable outcomes. The big problems – poverty; lack of infrastructure; insufficient nutrition; paucity of drinking water; vulnerability to infections among all sorts for men, women and children; lack of viable job opportunities (for women and men); concern for the vulnerability and bleak prospects of girl children translating into misogynistic practices such as early marriage or even female foeticide; the low social capital of women as unpaid house-workers; the diminished self-worth of men in a labour-rich, opportunity-scarce context; the pressure of scriptural and societal injunctions upon women to sacrifice their interests to those of the family and community – these are not problems that have a clear resolution or even clear shape as problems. Yet these were the problems that collectively conspired to render women particularly vulnerable. Women who face a bleak future and susceptibility to all forms of disease due to malnutrition and poverty are hardly likely to insist upon condom usage with unwilling male partners for fear of HIV/AIDS if it means that their or their children’s next meal would be in jeopardy. Societal and cultural problems that disadvantage women are unlikely to be solved within a funding-cycle time-line. Nor indeed is it possible to measure reliably the impact of interventions designed to change societal attitudes not only because they must necessarily be long-term and developmental in every sense but also because cause (the remedy, solution, or intervention) and effect (change in societal attitudes) make for ill-structured and multiple factor experiments at best.

For several weeks during my travel through slum projects, tourist sites, rural clinics, and informal highway brothels, I repeatedly confronted the “woman problem”, diversely manifested as women described: forced prostitution by husbands; voluntary prostitution to feed children after abandonment by husbands and partners; forced and unprotected sex with partners, clients and, for sex workers, with police and government agents; domestic abuse across class divisions; pressure to abort female foetuses; societal surveillance; the inability to imagine alternatives; and even the advantages of untaxed, lucrative sex work over other more labour-intensive and less remunerative forms of employment. In the midst of this depressing panoply of rural, urban, and con-urban women’s experiences, I came across two groups who were tackling some of the issues with admirable ingenuity.
The first group had decided to work on the problem of female foeticide in what was then considered the “capital” of the phenomenon, by embarking on an aggressive nutritional and vitamin-based regimen for pregnant women funded by a government understandably embarrassed by the “backward” practice of female foeticide. It may be worth noting that women were the ones who usually carried out this misogynistic practice usually after family pressure to undergo amniocentesis and abortion, but sometimes because of a preference among the women themselves for a male progeny, a “choice” that stemmed from their own low sense of worth. While most other interventions by the government focused on vocational training for girl-children to enhance their viability as productive economic units within the family, the strategy used by this group was not so much to preach to husband and wife in the family or to focus on economic viability alone as to create attachment to the foetus and a sense of care for her own body in the woman who would then resist termination of a female foetus identified through amniocentesis. Through this novel approach, the group had begun to report modest amelioration in the numbers, but it was unclear if the trend was sustainable or if the model could be successfully duplicated in other locations, especially without government funding for a costly nutritional regimen.

A second group of married women in a rural location had decided to ignore the problem of domestic abuse and forced, unprotected sex to focus on other issues such as water scarcity and the lack of infrastructure. They had decided to initiate a relentless letter-writing campaign directed to public development officials, exhorting them to build and repair roads, fix broken tubewells with hand-pumps which no longer pumped out groundwater efficiently, and to ask for a recognition not of their own problems as women but of the problems shared by the village. They had no funding for these “initiatives,” but had employed the help of a local NGO in locating the addresses of their government representatives. Over the course of some months, men who had resisted women’s participation in these groups and any resistance to their demands by beating and punishing them had begun to desist as they saw their own lives improved by women’s efforts on their collective behalf. Their grudging appreciation seemed to have translated into a transformation in the traditionally oppressive dynamic, with what durability we are not in a position to know.
These modes of resistance are neither Western nor Eastern or postcolonial as such. They are more accurately described as local in the sense that they could only happen in that way in that place at that time. I have been reluctant to write about these experiences in the past because I understand that anecdotal evidence is by definition undervalued, and because I had no numbers, no verification, no measure that could reliably translate into what development folks might call an “outcome”. Indeed, the solutions, if such they might be, do not even seem to respond in any causal way to the problem at hand in either case. And yet I realize that there are scores of instances of what I would call “unclaimed experiences” out there for which we do not yet have a language or understanding. I know that even when there can be enunciation when there is silence, and silence when there is speech. Even women with solutions – literate women with the vocabulary, the education, the talent, and the understanding (the women writers who supposedly can speak) in the first case study – come up against the woman problem in globality as they are silenced by the problem of the marketplace. Even women with problems – the women fighting female foeticide and domestic abuse without much education or resources (the woman who supposedly cannot speak) – seem to find solutions, sometimes by “misrecognizing” the problem. These situations do not easily “fit” our paradigm of anti-colonial feminist movements as such but they tell us something we can try to understand if we extend the notion of postcolonial resistance to what I have vaguely described as “colonial logic.” This logic includes a nexus of subscriptions based on some combination of race, sex, class, or capitalist ideology, and it is not easily named or described. What we know and how we know it extend into whether we can even know those things for which we have yet to develop a vocabulary. We come up repeatedly and in different ways against the epistemological limit that reminds us, “the subaltern cannot speak”.

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References


