

Under Western Eye

Chandra Talpade Mohanty



Sisterhood cannot be assumed on
the basis of gender; it must be
forged in concrete historical and
political practice and analysis

— *Chandra Talpade Mohanty* —

AZ QUOTES

- **'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'** (1984) is an academic essay by **Chandra Talpade Mohanty**, an Indian-American feminist scholar. In this essay, Mohanty argues that Western feminist scholarship has reduced all women of the third world into a single, collective other. She critiques the approach to feminism and third-world women, arguing for more nuanced scholarship from Western scholars.

- In "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty explores how Western scholarship treats women of the **third world**, or developing countries (specifically those of Africa and South and Southeast Asia). Her thesis is that Western feminism has a habit of treating third-world women as a **homogeneous** group, or one where all of its members are essentially the same. These women can be classified into a single category that applies to all non-Western women. The result is a singular idea of the **average third-world woman** that ignores the diversity of experiences within this group.

- Mohanty claims that the homogeneous approach to non-Western women amounts to an act of colonialism in Western feminist discourse. Mohanty defines **colonialism** as a "relation of structural domination, and a suppression. . . of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question."
- In this case, many Western feminist scholars reduce the diverse heterogeneities of women in the third world, colonizing it by confining it to a homogeneous category for Western scholars to use.



Use of Colonization

- evident economic and political hierarchies
- production of a particular cultural discourse about what is "third world."
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- Throughout her essay, Mohanty focuses on examples of this analytic discourse found in existing Western feminist scholarship. Specifically, Zed Press's "**Women in the Third World**" series, in which various scholars examine women's lives in third world countries and regions. Some of the main scholars that Mohanty critiques include Maria Cutrufelli, Fran Hosken, Beverly Lindsay, Patricia Jeffery, and Juliette Minces.

What Mohanty is trying to analyze is specifically...

- ...is the production of the 'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (western) feminist texts.
- In organizing her critique, Mohanty claims that she has identified three main analytic principles used by Western feminists in regards to the third world. They are:
- The assumption that women make for an existing, coherent, universal group with identical desires, interests, and needs across cultures
- An uncritical use of methodologies in order to prove this principle
- An implied model of power and struggle that promotes the idea of the average third-world woman

- “The definition of colonization I invoke is a predominantly discursive one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe” (Mohanty 61).

Implicit assumption of “the west” as the primary referent in theory and praxis

- She argues that “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholar-ship on the ‘third world’ in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world” (mohanty 63).

- Western Feminist discourse and political practice are not homogeneous in its goals, interests or analysis.
- Similar arguments related to methods of analysis can be made in terms of middle-class, African or Asian scholars.
- Thus, “while this article focuses specifically on western feminist discourse on women in the third world, the critiques [she] offers also pertain to identical analytical principles employed by third-world scholars writing about their own cultures” (mohanty 62)



- The connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of women produced by hegemonic discourses = not a relation of direct identity, correspondence or simple implication

Composite, singular ‘third-world woman’ – arbitrarily constructed?

- Third-World difference:
- “stable, a historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” and in which “western feminism appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries” (Mohanty 63).

What PROBLEMS does this create?

- Assumption of women as an already constituted group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location.
- Methodological level, in the uncritical way ‘proof of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided
- Political-underlying the methodologies and the analytic strategies
- “Women” as Category of Analysis or “we are all sisters in struggle“... all of us the same gender, across classes and cultures, and somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group” (mohanty 65)

- “Homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals” (Mohanty 65)
- Women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression

- ‘A meaningful transnational literacy will require recognition of the location of readers and of reading as a socialized activity within a particular context.
- It will require that we learn to read literature by and about “Third-World” women as more than informal sociology, even as it will enjoin upon us the need to read global experiences and events as complex, intricately interwoven social texts.
- In other words, it will oblige us to recognize the complexities of subject construction everywhere and to learn to read the world through what I would refer to as the “logic of adjacence.” We would then read women in the world not as the same but as neighbours, as “near dwellers” whose adjacence can become more meaningful. Through this logic – a logic that might be usefully applied to the general orientation of post colonialism – we would read the world, not as one (in the sense of being already united), but as belonging together’

Six ways in which 'women' as a category of analysis is used in western feminist discourse to construct 'third-world women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group:

- Women as Victims of Male Violence
- Woman as universally dependent
- Married Women as Victims of the Colonial Process
- Women and Familial Systems
- Women and Religious Ideologies
- Women and the Development Process

Women as Victims of Male Violence

- Women are defined consistently as the victims of male control - the "sexually oppressed."
- Woman's sexuality is controlled
- 'Objects-who-defend-themselves' and subjects-who-perpetrate-violence' thus a simple opposition between the powerless (women) and the powerful (men) groups of people

Woman as universally dependent

- dependency relationships, based upon race, sex and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. These are the linkages among Third World Women” (Mohanty 67)
- Also, statements like: “My analysis will start by stating that all African women are politically and economically dependent’ or “nevertheless, either overtly or covertly, prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work for African Women’ (Mohanty 67)

Married Women as Victims of the Colonial Process

- According to Levi-Strauss's theory of kinship, "women are not subordinate because of the fact of exchange, but because of the modes of exchange instituted, and the values attached to these modes." (mohanty 68)
- The difference between traditional marriage contract versus the post-colonial marriage contract.

- Women of Africa
- Before European colonization:
- Bemba women are protected by their initiation ceremony at puberty, which has both political and ritual power.
- After European colonization:
- Bemba women are not under the protection of tribal laws (Cutrufelli 43).
- **Bemba women should be treated differently before and after their initiation ceremony. Otherwise, it means the denial of the differential value attached to the exchange of marriage stages. This View denies the political effects of the initial ceremony. (Mohanty 70)**

Women and Familial Systems

- Elizabeth Cowie has argued that “women as women are not simply located within the family. Rather, it is in the family, as a effect of kinship structures, that women as women are constructed, defined within and by the group.” (49-63)
- She criticized about Juliette Minces’s citation of “the patriarchal family as the basis for ‘an almost identical vision of women’ that Arab and Muslim societies have” indicating that there are two main problems:

- 1)one cannot talk about a vision of women shared by certain societies without mentioning their particular historical and ideological backgrounds
- 2)women are constructed by socio-economic contexts, not exist prior to their entry into the family.

Women and Religious Ideologies

- Patricia Jeffery has taken Islamic ideology as one factor to explain the status of Purdah women in purdah in her research.
- Although her analysis “does not succumb to this kind of unitary notion of religion, it does collapse all ideological specificities into economic relations, and universalizes on the basis of this comparison.” (Mohanty 71).
- **The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being. Because women are subsumed under religion presented in fundamental terms, they are inevitably seen as evolving in nonhistorical time they have virtually no history. Any analysis of change is therefore foreclosed.**

Women and the Development Process

- The development of lives of women in third-world = economic development or economic progress which affects women living in developing countries both positively and negatively.
- Perdita Huston argues that “education and training, work and wages, access to health and other services” are the center factors that influences women’s problems and needs in developing countries. To deal with these problems and needs, improved development policies should be made to offer training for women. (1979:115)
- However, she fails to see that women in different countries have different needs. She categorizes them as a group characterized by gender, and fails to take local history and political contexts, as well as social class and ethnic identities into consideration.
- Unfortunately, until today, an increasing number of western feminist will write according to this tradition.

Methodological Universalism

- Methodologies Western Feminist Writings Use:
- Arithmetic Method
- Use of “Concepts”
- Gender as Superordinate Category

Arithmetic Method

- “Large number of different, fragmented examples... add up to a universal fact” (Mohanty, 75)
- Hosken (1985)
- “Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights”
- purdah –descriptive generalization

Errors/Cons

- 1.Cultural and Ideological context
- 2.Same action, different meaning
- 3.Analytically reductive
- 4.Useless when facing elaboration of oppositional political strategy

Use of Concepts

- Concepts are “often used without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts.”(Mohanty, 75)
- concept e.g.:sexual division of labour descriptively valid but concepts = more than just “descriptive”
- Mere existence of similar situation vs. meaning and explanation of socio-historical context

- Doubt the Assumption
- Believing existence as reality:
- 1) women in the Third World can create a false sense of commonality of oppression, sisterhood etc.
- 2) "Beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism, and imperialism" (Mohanty, 77)
- -Thus, local contextual analysis are a must!

Use of Gender as Superordinate Category

- Use of gender as a superordinate category of organizing analysis = universalistic proof and instantiation of the category “Empirical studies of gender differences are confused with the analytical organization of cross-cultural work” (Mohanty, 77)



- Confusion Leads to...
- “female:male are superordiante categories... (that) are universal... (as) they organize the universe of a system of representations” (Brown, 1983)
- Assumption – empirical proof of its existence
- WHICH...
- **Creates monolithic images of “third world women”**

- “western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group which is placed in kinship, legal and other structures, defines third-world women as subjects outside of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted as women through these very structures.” (mohanty 80)
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“Underdeveloped” or “Developing” structures create image of “third-world woman”

- Third world women automatically defined as:
- Religious = not progressive
- Family oriented = traditional
- Legal minors = not conscious of their rights
- Illiterate = ignorant
- Domestic = backwards
- Revolutionary = their country is in a state of war, they must fight!” “Third world difference”

Idea of superiority of the West produce images like:

- Veiled woman vs. powerful mother + obedient wife
- These images are universal, a historical, colonialist discourse in defining First/Third world connections.
- Adding the “third world” difference to “sexual difference”
Predicted on assumptions about western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives

Conclusion

- Eurocentric assumptions Reinforces that people in third world haven't evolved to the extent West has.
- This type of feminist analysis by homogenizing & systemizing experiences of different groups of women, erases all marginal & resistant modes of experiences.
- Labeling the “east” and “woman” as others, (western) Man/Humanism represented as the center, the norm. Author suggests that one ENABLES and SUSTAINS the other.