

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Post-Colonial Feminism: Giving Voice to Third World Women

Khaloua Naoual

Doctoral Student, Mohammed First University, Morocco

Abstract:

This article provides a discussion of the most important theories of postcolonial feminism. This examination will focus mainly on two prominent postcolonial feminist who shed light on the case of women in the third world, namely, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Chandra Talpade Mohanty with her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". Then, I will proceed to the discussion of Benita Parry's essay "Problems in current theories of colonial discourse", where she studies Spivak's theory of post-colonial feminism and Bhabha's theory of post-colonialism.

Keywords: *Feminism, postcolonialism, thirds world women, sexism, racism*

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to raise and explore the following central question: How has Post-colonial Feminism as a persistent and independent theory emerged to give a voice to women of the Third World who have been subject to the colonial domination intersected with patriarchy?

One of the basic arguments for this essay consists in the idea that women of the third world or the ex-colonised countries have been "doubly oppressed" to borrow Spivak's dictum. On the one hand, they suffered from the oppression for being women within a society completely dominated by a patriarchal system. On the other hand, they have been oppressed simply for the fact of being women of the third world or black women.

Therefore, this discussion will start with a brief theoretical introduction, which attempts to shed some light on the term Feminism in its broadest aspect then move to a profound examination of Post-colonial Feminism in particular. This examination will focus on two main postcolonial feminist critics who have taken the initiative of theorizing for women of the third world, namely, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Chandra Talpade Mohanty with her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". Then, I will proceed to the discussion of Benita Parry's essay "Problems in current theories of colonial discourse", where she studies Spivak's theory of post-colonial feminism and Bhabha's theory of post-colonialism.

2. Theoretical Background of Feminism

To begin with, it is necessary to provide a general theoretical overview of the term feminism and its historical background. According to a definition in the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, "The term **feminism** can be used to describe any political, cultural or economic movement that aims at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women".

Moreover, in its historical context, feminism can be divided into three main waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century's, started in Britain in the woman Suffrage Movement. During this wave women defended their basic rights as the right to have access to education, profession, voting and equal status with men. (Wikipedia) The second wave started in the 1960s and lasted till the 1980s. During this wave, feminists sought the freedom of expression in all its forms and were completely concerned with the personal needs of the Middle-class white women. Equally important, Feminism was seen as an essentialist approach i.e. women as one monolithic group against other groups. (Wikipedia)

In response to this biased movement raised the third wave in the 1990s and it still persists up till nowadays. Third wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what "it deems the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity", which over-emphasize the experiences of upper middle-class white women. (Wikipedia)

3. Post-Colonial Feminism

Evidently, Post-colonial Feminism, the main concern of this discussion, falls within the third wave. It can also be used interchangeably with Third World Feminism. The combination of the term "post-colonial" with "woman" or as Sara Suleri puts it "the marriage of two margins"(273) that is to say, post-colonial subjects and feminist subjects, has raised many controversies amongst scholars and feminists for its very nature as a counter discourse which has shouldered the responsibility of subverting and dismantling the imperialist implications of Western Feminism. In the same line of thought, Suleri points out that "the coupling of postcolonial with woman, however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor of the

'good'" (273). This suggests that postcolonial feminism has marked a new line of demarcation in the history of feminism: while it was predominantly led by middle-class white women from Western Europe and North America during much of its history, women of other races have proposed an alternative feminism_ post colonial feminism_ which permits "elevating the racially female voice", meaning, paying great attention to the racial identity of women

This will lead us to bring into focus two post-colonial feminist critics who have been the leading figures of post-colonial feminism. First, Gayatri Spivak in her influential article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raised the notion of 'double colonization' which has been a central point in the theory of postcolonial feminism. In this respect, Ashcroft et al. state that "the notion 'double colonization' – i.e. that women in formerly colonised societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies_ became a catch-phrase of post-colonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s" (250).

In "Can the Subaltern Speak" Spivak voices out how women of India_ being women of the Third World, are condemned between the cruelty of the patriarchal oppression embodied in the self-immolation of widows (Sati suicide) and the colonial ideological constriction of the white man. Spivak puts it clearly in her words:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation the figure of women disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third World Woman', caught between tradition and modernization (102).

The quotation speaks itself and reveals how women originating in the ex-colonized countries have been subject to two kinds of oppression the fact which has radically silenced them. Benita Parry commented on Spivak's work noting that

"What Spivak uncovers are instances of doubly-oppressed native women who, caught between the dominations of a native of a native masculinist-imperialist ideology, intervene by 'unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting(s) of the social text of Sati-suicide' (Spivak 1985b:129) ..." (36).

In whole, what Spivak stresses in simple words is that any woman of the third world while identifying herself must say "I am a Third World woman" and not simply a woman. While mentioning her racial belonging, she thus implies that she does share with all women of the world the sexual oppression, but, at the same time, she still suffers from racial oppression which is specific to her and which not all women of the world- white women- share with her.

Alongside with Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty stands as an outstanding figure in the field of postcolonial feminism. Mohanty's famous article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" is basically a critique of western feminist theories, which, she argues, have failed in properly theorizing for third world women. In addition, she endeavours to examine the western feminist discourse to clarify how they construct "the third world women as a monolithic subject of knowledge". (Mohanty 262)

In the same vein, Mohanty reveals that the assumption that Third World Women are a coherent group, ignoring their social factors is problematic and not relevant. She adds that the western feminist theories assume women as "an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires" (261) undifferentiated by any other factors such as class, ethnicity or racial and geographical location and regardless of any contradictions.

Therefore, Mohanty bitterly criticises the universality of western feminist theories and their categorization of the third world women as a monolithic object, disregarding their personal experiences and the social and cultural contexts in which those women really live.

Hence, a better theoretical model must be highly context- specific and aware of particular women and groups of women without falling into the false generalizations (Mohanty 263). That is to say, this model should acknowledge the contradictions as well as the commonalities in women's experiences. In addition, these theories need to have a genuine touch with the particular real experiences of women. For instance, if we take widows, we actually know little or nothing about them, or even about the fact of their pain.

The third phase of this paper consists of the discussion of the work of Benita Parry which is a critique of both of Spivak's and Bhabha's works. She suggests that "their dissimilar methods act to constrain the development of an anti-imperialist critique" (Parry 36). As far as Spivak is concerned, Parry identifies the lacunae in the fact that Spivak neglects the ability of the native subject to produce a text that can challenge and subvert the codified discourse of the imperialist power; that "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak" (quoted in Parry 36).

Spivak's theory is inspired by her study of the discourse of Sati (widow sacrifice). Spivak shed light on the notion of double oppression or as Parry puts it "instances of doubly oppressed native women who, caught between the domination of a native patriarchy and a foreign masculinist- imperialist ideology, intervene by 'unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewritings of the social text of sati suicide'" (parry 36).

Parry argues against the theoretical model of Spivak and suggests that there are evidences to women's voice traces as opposed to Spivak's claim giving as evidence Chandra Mohanty's critique of Western feminist writings on 'Third World Women', wherein this latter stressed the difference of the native women and their specific situations. In this respect, Parry argues that "since the native women is construed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different class, caste and cultural specifics, it should be possible to locate traces and testimony on women's voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak model of the silent subaltern". (Parry 37).

Parry strongly stressed the fact that Spivak's theory is a kind of transcription of the story of colonialism in a way that consolidates 'the imperialist sovereign reign' (Parry 37). And that she remakes the native in a no more than another form of subjectivity, otherness and Subalternity, in that "[she] gives no speaking part of the colonized" (Parry 37).

On the same token, parry suggests that Spivak's theory can equally be estimated for its utility as a counter discourse "that is directed at challenging the authority of the received historical record and restoring the effaced signs of

consciousness" (Parry 37). This highlights how the native is constructed by the colonizer in a manner that served the colonial and imperialist interests on the level of administration and exploitation of resources.

In short, for Benita Parry Spivak's model reproduces imperialist axioms which deny the ability of the native to dismantle the colonial text and "deny to the native the ground from which to utter a reply to imperialism's ideological aggression or to enunciate a different self" (Parry 38).

To concretize her study of Spivak's work, Benita Parry suggests a rereading of Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* building upon Spivak's views. Therefore, Parry argues that Spivak's work is a fundamental element in explaining how a society which identity has been constructed by the English colonizer, and which has equally resulted in othering the native, the native female identity was lost and excluded amongst the norms of the feminist individualism. This dictum framed Spivak's reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* wherein she pictures the character of Antoinette/ Bertha as being the outcome of the imperialist feminist individualist works. Spivak criticises Rhys' novel in that is "a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native and situates Antoinette/ Bertha as caught between the English imperialist and the Black Jamaican" (Parry 39).

Thus, Spivak highlights the dislocation of the Creole identity_ the female Creole identity, represented in Antoinette/ Bertha which is confused and dislocated between her white settler and the black native, she is neither white nor black and also unaware of her female identity as being a woman/ a feminine. Therefore, Spivak's reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests that just like Bronte's novel wherein Bertha Mason is described "as situated on the human/ animal frontier ... so does Rhys novel via Antoinette" (Parry 39).

Contrary to Antoinette/ Bertha character, Parry suggests that according to Spivak the character of Christophine in the novel constitutes a counter discourse against the imperialist axioms embedded in the text, or as Parry puts it 'Spivak sees her as marking the limits of the texts discourse" (Parry 40).

Furthermore, Parry argues that Spivak's strategy of reading has disparaged the character of Christophine who is a speaking subject in the text. She ignores "Christophine's inscription as the native, female, individual self who defies the demands of the discriminatory discourse impinging on her person" (Parry 40). this suggests that Rhys has posted a character, or rather the only female character, who has challenged both of the patriarchal and the colonial dominations. She is aware of her identity as a native inhabitant of the Indies and of her identity as a female. In this regard, Parry points out that "Christophine defiance is not enacted in a small and circumscribed space appropriated within the lines of dominant code, but is a stance from which she delivers a frontal assault against antagonist, and as such constitutes a counter discourse" (Parry 39).

In short, Benita Parry argues that Spivak's own writings work to restrict the space from which the colonized can write back and voice out his intellectual contribution and rewrites his history.

On the other hand, Parry moves to discuss Homi Bhabha's work which goes at odds with Spivak's line of thought to some extent. For Bhabha, the subaltern has spoken just in the very fact that through their texts they have questioned the colonized imperialist statement. Benita Parry points out that Bhabha goes hand in hand with Said's *Orientalism* wherein it is argued that "power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser" (quoted I Parry 41). Yet, she maintains that Bhabha goes beyond this idea while arguing "that a discursive system split in enunciation, constitutes a dispersed and variously positioned native who by (mis)appropriating the terms of dominant ideology, is able to intercede against and resist this mode of construction" (Parry 41).

Therefore, Parry suggests that Bhabha seeks to dismantle the codified colonial discourse of the colonized and admits that in this activity, meaning the activity of writing, "the subaltern has spoken and his readings of colonialist text recover a native voice..." (Parry 41). Moreover, Parry suggests that Bhabha argues against the notion of mimicry suggesting that while the native produces a text, it is an original text, different in itself, and not just a reproduction of the already constructed colonial legacies "for 'in the hybrid moment', what the native rewrites is not a copy of the colonialist original, but a qualitatively different thing-in-itself, where misreading and incongruities expose the uncertainties and ambivalences of the colonialist text and deny its authorizing presence" (parry 42).

Thus Benita Parry argues for the success of Bhabha's theory in subverting and disclosing the colonialist texts, she further explains this stating that the colonized while rearticulating the English text or giving the scenario written by the colonizer a performance, he "pervert the meaning and message of the English book ... and [] makes an absolute exercise of power impossible" (parry 42).

Furthermore, Benita Parry suggests argues that people who are currently engaged in situations of colonialism cannot believe in the construction that discourse analysts make to their situations. Here, Parry puts the blame on analysts like Spivak and Bhabha whose 'alternative narratives of colonialism obscure "the murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists" (Parry 4"). She assumes that both Spivak and Bhabha denies the colonized the ability to write a counter discourse able to subvert the colonial discourse.

Apart from Spivak and Bhabha, Parry sees that "Fanon's dialogical interrogation of European power and native insurrection reconstructs a process of cultural resistance and cultural disruption, participates in writing a text that can answer colonialism back, and anticipates another condition beyond imperialism" (parry 43). This suggests that Fanon's theory constitutes a genuine counter discourse with adequate alternatives_ alternative ideology, which consists, according to Fanon, of defending the past, the past of the colonized, and its culture and rejecting the culture of imperialism. Fanon stresses this assuming that "the writer and intellectual who utilize techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger is his country" (Parry 43) has limited effects. Therefore, Benita Parry stresses the need for such a theory that can move the colonial discourse steps forward.

In conclusion, Post-colonial Feminism has crossed a long way to assert itself on the scene. Definitely, it has been a great accomplishment in the theory of Postcoloniality as it has worked to subvert and dismantle many of the colonialist and imperialist implications. Moreover, Post-colonial feminism has drawn Third World women's attention to their racial identity and the distinctiveness of their cases. Yet, As Muslim women, we do not have to forget the superior status we have been granted by Islam. Within the Muslim Shari'a, women are honoured in being mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. So, let us think of feminism in its Islamic context.

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