

Through Third World Women's Eyes: The Shortcomings of Western Feminist Scholarship on the Third World

Dr. Abeer Al-Sarrani

Dr. Alaa Alghamdi

Department of Languages and Translation

Taibah University

Medina

Saudi Arabia

Abstract

There is a growing consciousness among Muslim scholars of feminist scholars' tendency to generalize and make unwarranted assumptions regarding the position of women in the Muslim World. Western feminists have not succeeded in their assumed mission to "rescue" Third World women. This article is written in response to Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988, 1991). The problems that Western scholars face if attempting to promote Third World women's rights include the failure of some campaigns by Western feminists through analyzing some of the Western feminism limitation in areas such as the geopolitics, especially the history of colonialism, and cultural and religious specificities of these Third World societies. This article analyzes problems that Western scholars face when attempting to participate in calling for Third World women's rights, following Mohanty identification of three main problematic analytic principles. There is a tendency to universalize values such as freedom and agency, coupled with a misunderstanding of the meaning of social and religious conventions such as the wearing of the veil or

headscarf. Furthermore, investigation of issues facing Muslim women is complicated by the fact that Western feminists are consistently seen as a threat and an indirect way to colonize this part of the world. The article concludes that the key to building new understanding is to avoid the tendency to essentialize or totalize the experience of women of an unfamiliar culture.

Keywords: Mohanty, feminism, Islam, Orientalism, human rights.

Women in Muslim Arabic countries continuously encounter many challenges in their Third World societies and in the World in general, one of which is to secure social status for themselves in a mostly male-dominated society. Tracing this topic, historically, one could observe that many Western feminist scholars participated directly and indirectly to help their sisters in that part of the world. Unfortunately, most of these Western efforts did not succeed due to the fact that Western scholars viewed the challenge through their own Western perspective concerning gender equality while neglecting specific religious, cultural and traditional Arabic and Islamic notions of gender relations, historical economical, geopolitical notions, specifically the history of colonialism. Gayatri Spivak may have been the first to point this out in her article entitled “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1978). Pointing out that the Indian custom of suttee is very easy for Western critics to denounce as a drastic example of the devaluation of women’s lives, Spivak questions whether the women who live in societies which practice suttee themselves have a voice with regard to this issue, and if so, who would be willing to listen? In denouncing a foreign practice that many women appear to freely choose, are not Western scholars and critics likewise shutting off the voices of “subaltern” women, albeit with the intention of empowering them? Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, claims that Western feminists have failed in their attempts to define and locate the actual circumstances of women and feminisms in the Third World, let alone theorizing and criticizing them. Mohanty goes farther by stating that Western feminism has erased historical and geographical Third World conditions and therefore “colonized” Third World women by constituting them as a “single monolithic subject” due to their lack of knowledge of the real circumstances that “Third World women” face in their countries.

Due to the fact that I belong to the group of “Third World women” and would like to academically participate in the area of “Third World feminism” in the future, I would like to counter, while referring to Mohanty’s previous article and her other article titled “Under Western

Eyes: Revisited,” that some Western feminists did not succeed in their mission of claiming to rescue Third World women. To state and prove such argument, I believe it is important to discuss numerous points, starting with an examination of the problems that Western scholars face if attempting to participate in calling for Third World women’s rights, as Mohanty describes them. Then, it is important to explore the reasons that led to the failure of some campaigns by Western feminists through analyzing some of the Western feminism limitation in areas such as the geopolitics, especially the history of colonialism, and cultural and religious specificities of these Third World societies. After that, I think it would be useful to provide a general overview of some of the current feminist movements led by Third World women in different parts of the Third World such as the ones taking place in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Finally, such argument will be concluded by laying out the possible ways in which Western scholars can participate in different feminist movements in the Third World countries. However, given the limits of this paper, the focus will be on analyzing the problems that Western scholars face if attempting to participate in calling for Third World women’s rights and categorizing the limitations they experience in areas of geopolitics and religious specificities. A broader examination of the topic may be a subject for future research and analysis.

Because Western feminists' efforts have entailed an application of Western culture and understanding of gender equality to the Arabic Muslim world without really taking into consideration the specific geopolitical, religious, cultural, and traditional notions of the Muslim societies, people from many Arabic Muslim societies have, understandably, rejected this interference. Western feminists' contributions have been regarded as either a planned strategy to destroy the culture and tradition of the Arabic Muslim world, or an attempt to westernize the society. Therefore, Western feminists generally face a two-fold problem when discussing the status of women in the Third World. Shadi Hamid in his article “Between Orientalism and Postmodernism: the Changing Nature of Western Feminist Thought Towards the Middle East,” explains that if Western feminists neglect the traditional and cultural nature of the society, an Arabic society will consider them as a threat to their social order because their interference will be seen as an attempt of Westernization. On the other hand, if they chose not to help women in these societies, they will be also considered as another agent of oppression against Third World women (p.77). So, it seems that either way they choose to position themselves; they will still face criticism.

I believe that many Western scholars fall in the first category; they participate in calling for Third World women’s rights without really having adequate knowledge about the nature of such societies. In “Under Western Eyes”, Mohanty identifies three main problematic analytic principles

used in Western feminist scholarship when discussing “Third World women”. She starts by exploring the “strategic location of the category <<women>> vis-à-vis the context of analysis” (MCS, p.399), to show the danger of Western scholarship’s representation of “women” as a “coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (MCS, pp.399-400). So, according to Mohanty, Western scholars tended to describe “Third World women” as victimized, poor, uneducated, and sexually constrained inferiors. Indeed through my experience as an international Saudi student while studying at American institutions, I actually observed such overgeneralizations and stereotypical constructions used to describe women’s conditions in countries like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran. Many Western audience and intellectuals, for instance, miss the fact that there is a huge difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the way of dealing with women due to the fact that Saudi Arabia is a Sunni country whereas Iran is a Shia one. According to their different religious sects, each one of these countries has its own complex and distinct histories regarding the statues of women that could be discussed in a comparative study. In some Muslim countries – for example, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia – education levels for women are as high or higher than those for men; literacy levels and health outcomes are similarly favorable for women (CIA Factbook 2013). It may be understandable that generalization may occur when one is dealing with a culture far removed from one’s own, but in this case, ignoring the specific differences between societies in the Middle East leads to a shallow and easily invalidated analysis. Unfortunately, theory based on such generalization is far too frequently accepted as valid.

So, it is important for Western scholars or any group participating in any issue in a different culture to fully study the specificities of that culture to guarantee a successful or at least an appreciated result and avoid any kind of rejection or possible failure. Therefore, I totally agree with Mohanty insofar as she explains that in knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully (p.505). That is precisely the kind of knowledge that Western feminists must acquire before attempting to participate in the Third World’s feminist issues.

However, it is equally important to discuss the current status of the Western feminists’ participation in the Third World and locate and examine the kinds of limitations that these Western feminists experience there. I believe that one of the major limitations that Western Feminism

suffers from is the fact of neglecting the geopolitical specificities that shape the Arab and Muslim worlds. Colonial history played a major role in shaping the image of the Western world and consequently Western interference in that part of the world. Therefore, as Hamid explains, it is really important for Western scholars to realize that previous Western interference in the Muslim Arab world have led Arab Muslims to reject Western engagement, especially in the area of feminist analysis (p.88). In the same vein, Leila Ahmed notes in her article "Feminism and Cross-Cultural Inquiry: The Terms of Discourse in Islam", that "the colonial powers and their agents, and in particular the missionaries through the schools they founded did indeed explicitly set out to undermine Islam through the training and remolding of women" (p.144). As a result, Western feminists are consistently seen as a threat and an indirect way to colonize this part of the world. Furthermore, the colonial ideology has set the Western society as the "norm" generalizing about other civilizations as the "Other". Such ideology did not only affect the colonized group; it has extended its reach to the colonizers themselves. Therefore, I believe that this colonial ideology is probably the reason that made the Western feminists want to apply their own perspective about women's rights because according to them it is the norm. In the same vein, Lila Abu-Lughod in her essay titled "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" states that:

Rather than seeking to "save" others (with the superiority it implies and the violence it would entail) Western feminist scholars might better think in terms of working with the Third World women in situations that are always subject to historical transformation and consider their own larger responsibilities to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the worlds in which they find themselves (p.783).

Mohanty also ties those two notions together in her following assumption where she explains that the "assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality... and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the <<Third World>> in the context of a world system dominated by the West... characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the Third World" (MCS, p.398). If Western feminist scholars fail to interrogate the effects of the colonial mindset and thus do not appreciate their own stance within it, the chances are much higher that they will universalize their own values and neglect to consider legitimate variations from those values. Of course, this is hardly a failing of feminists in particular – the universalizing of one's own values is a common deficiency or liability in the views of scholars from a dominant culture. Differences are not authenticated and therefore almost not noticed. However, feminist scholars may be particularly vulnerable to such fallacies if their attention is focused on a

generalized consciousness of the subjugation of women. Empathy with women in other cultures and the assuming or forcing of a similarity in conditions and mindset across cultures may lead to cultural blindness and an unwillingness to notice or give credence to differences.

The other limitation of Western Feminists' experience in the "Third World" is their misunderstanding of some of the religious practices concerning women in Islam. Mohanty in the section titled "Methodological Universalism, or Women's Oppression is a Global Phenomenon", reveals the false assumptions made by Western scholars regarding indications and meanings of wearing the veils in different Islamic countries. For example, she states that Fran Hosken is wrong when regarding "[r]ape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) [as] all violations of basic human rights" (p.409). While, I agree with Mohanty that Hosken's clustering of the purdah with rape, domestic violence and forced prostitution emphasizes its 'sexual control' function as the primary explanation for purdah, whatever the context" (p.409), I would also like to add that Islamic laws state that women have the choice whether to wear the purdah or only the veil. The veil in Islam is defined as "a scarf that covers the hair and not the face". Therefore, covering more than the hair with a scarf is not required by the theological tenets of Islam, although, cultural practices and regulations vary. Muslim women are free to cover their faces if they wish to do so. Moreover, Muslims have the choice of following one of four schools of thought: Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafai and Maliki. These groups have different opinions regarding some Islamic tenets, including the covering of the face. In both Shafai, and Hanafi sects, women have the freedom to decide whether to cover their faces, whereas Maliki and Hanbali sects consider that covering the face is a must that women should follow. In addition, there are certain countries as Afghanistan where women are forced to cover their faces regardless of the religious sect they follow. Such regulations, in my point of view, are due to the pressure practiced by Islamic fundamentalists who usually follow or even at certain occasions make up the most strict rules and obligations in religion and eventually force the public to follow them without questioning them. In any case, it is clear from these variations in rules and practice within Islam that covering the face is not religiously forced on women; rather, if there is any coercion to do so, it is social and political rather than religious. By the same token, there is no universal 'sexual control' over Muslim women as mandated or necessitated by the religion itself. On the contrary, Islam gives women the choice to interpret the directive to veil. By definition, therefore, wearing the veil is not to be regarded as a 'sexual control' over women, and to imply that it is must indicate an over-simplification and an exaggeration of the coercive aspects of the veil. The variations in the practice and women's adoption of it may be overlooked by Western observers, to

whom the concept of any mandatory covering may appear oppressive, even if these critics were to understand the differences in practice across the Muslim world. Of course, this viewpoint also ignores the fact that the wearing of head coverings is or has been the custom for many in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well.

Of course, the fact is that there are many Muslim women who do not wear the veil at all, and the Muslim society does not have the right to regard them as non-Muslims. Wearing the veil is a religious specificity that is practiced by some women and neglected by others. So, the choice to cover the face or even wear the veil is one of the rights that some Muslim feminists reinforce. However, in some cases, Islamic fundamentalists along with the controlling male-dominated society have deprived women of the right to make this choice, a dilemma which reveals the fact that Western feminists' concerns may be misplaced. Rather than denouncing the practice of wearing the veil or headscarf, for example, they could have helped their sisters in calling for their right to choose wearing the veil instead of viewing it as a sexual control on women that has to be banned. The issue, perhaps, is that the wearing of the veil has taken on a symbolic presence in Western thought – a connotation that obscures the very significance that the garment may have for those whom it concerns most closely – Muslim women.

It is, perhaps, no accident that the strongest Western opposition to the wearing of the veil has come about in the present socio-political climate, where, in the wake of 9/11, there has been a mistrust of the Muslim subject in Western countries. Muslim women themselves have become "... increasingly important symbols in struggles over war, feminism, immigration, and civil society while rarely having the space to communicate about themselves and their perspectives" (Ceretti 2012). While often conceptualized as an attempt to "liberate" Muslim women from the "oppressive" custom of wearing the headscarf, there can be little doubt that singling out the practices of a particular minority or immigrant culture and banning those practices has overtly racist or discriminatory overtones and may be construed or conflated with a societal rejection of those who practice them. Moreover, it appears that these nuances may exist whether or not they are consciously imposed. The problem with conceptualizing a class or group of people in terms of their symbolic connotation is the dehumanization of that group. If the concerns and oppressions of women in the Islamic world are condensed into a single symbol – the headscarf – this constitutes a vast oversimplification and a deep neglect of the issues those individuals actually face. These become less engaging to occidental observers; as one critic puts it, "... many non-Muslims are fascinated with unveiling and see wardrobe change as the only change they can believe in" (Ceretti, 2012).

In the same vein Abu-Lughod discusses the limitations of Western feminism concerning the meaning of the veil through a consideration of the burqa and the many meanings of veiling in the Muslim world. She argues that feminist scholars need to develop “a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires” (p.783). Judith Butler also discusses Mohanty’s article and agrees that “focusing on ostensible lack of agency signified by the veil or burka, not only misunderstands the various cultural meanings that the burka could carry for women who wear it, but also denies the very idioms of agency that are relevant for such women” (p.47). Hamid also explains that due to the lack of understanding the meaning of hijab and women’s choice to wear it, French feminist groups unconsciously participated in the oppression against Muslim women when they endorsed President Jacques Chirac’s 2004 call to ban the headscarf (p.82). However, there are grounds for disputing Hamid’s claim. This controversial ban that came about in 2004 did not single out the headscarf, but was constructed as a prohibition on the wearing of all obvious religious symbols in French public schools. These would include, for example, a large crucifix as well as a headscarf or hijab (Ezekiel, 2006, p. 256). The stated intention was to preserve the secularism of the French state by eliminating the public wearing of ostentatious signs of religious affiliation. Overall, the prohibition on the public display of religious symbols in France is best understood when contextualized within French history and culture with its longstanding emphasis on secularism, since the time of the French Revolution.

Misunderstanding these origins, many critics and commentators appear to overlook the extent of the ban. Most isolate the banning of the headscarf as the true intent of this law and the point of interest in its social adoption; obviously, it is the aspect of the law that catches the public imagination. Although the law was controversial, it is evident that it did indeed have supporters who viewed it as a potential liberation of Muslim women from an antiquated and repressive custom. Steven G. Gey in his article, “Free Will, Religious Liberty, and a Partial Defense of the French Approach to Religious Expression in Public Schools”, states that:

Sixty prominent French women in the arts and professions signed a petition sponsored by *Elle* magazine that supported the new law and interpreted the law from a feminist perspective as a ban on “un symbole visible de la soumission de la femme”—“a visible symbol of the submission of women (p.7).

It is a remarkable example of sophistry that the loss of personal freedom of choice (to wear or not to wear the veil) was sublimated to a supposed noble cause by some proponents of the French law, as the preceding quotation implies. The impulse to ban the wearing of the headscarf for

women's 'own good' and often against their express wishes, of course, smacks of paternalism – very ironically, coming from a supposedly feminist perspective. James Graff in his article “Should France Ban Head Scarves?” released in the Times magazine states that “[t]hose favoring a ban on the head scarf often present themselves as feminists, fighting a symbol of oppression”(www.time.com). Of course, ironically, because Western feminists did not understand Muslim women's choice to wear the veil, they also participated in the oppression those women faced. Hamid also reinforces this oppression and agrees that with this ban, many Muslim women are now deprived from their right to choose whether to cover their hair or face (p.82). Moreover, the focus on the headscarf and its symbolic connotations takes attention away from opportunities to support. Rottmann and Ferree (2008) discuss a parallel situation in Germany – shortly after the banning of the headscarf in schools in France, Germany, likewise, debated over passing a similar law. Rottmann and Farree (2008) note that the issue of the headscarf drew “intense feminist involvement”, but another issue that arose at the same time and had the potential to affect Muslim women, changes in antidiscrimination law, was largely ignored by feminist media (Rottmann and Ferree, 2008, p. 481). Again, the symbolic value of the headscarf supercedes addressing the real needs and concerns of Muslim women. Rottmann and Ferree (2008) argue for the importance of intersectionality – the ability and practice of regarding more than one issue or type of oppression simultaneously. Intersectionality does not guarantee that Western feminists will be better apprised of the needs of Muslim women. However, it does present a more flexible and responsive model that is preferable to an over-emphasis of a single simplistic and easily misinterpreted issue, such as the focus on “liberating” Muslim women from the headscarf!

In general, as Mohanty points out, Western feminists have certain limitations in understanding the nature of gender inequality among Muslim women. The Iranian feminist scholar Ziba MirHosseini in her article “Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism”, explains that perceived Islamic inequalities towards women are actually due to the false interpretations by Islamic fundamentalists who interpret the Quran and the Prophet's sayings in a way that guarantees them control over the society in general and women specifically (p.641). According to MirHosseini, Muslim feminists claim that the source of gender inequality is not Islam but rather the “cultural norms of early Muslim societies” that assume that:

Women are created of men and for men; women are inferior to men; women need to be protected; men are guardians and protectors of women; and male and female sexuality differ and the latter is dangerous to the social order. These assumptions and theories are nowhere more evident than in the rules that define the formation and termination of marriage, through which

gender inequalities are sustained in present-day Muslim societies (p.643).

Furthermore, Islamic feminists are also showing that the oppression and inequality towards women contradict divine justice in the Quran. While it is true that Islam (like Christianity and Judaism) is a patriarchal religion, the Quran specifically asserts the equality of men and women on several occasions. The erosion of women's social rights was not the product of Islam but of social mores, many of which were in place prior to the tenets of the Islamic religion. MirHosseini explains that Islamic feminists show that men's claimed right to freely divorce and unconditionally marry multiple wives "were not granted to them by God but by Muslim male jurists" (p.642). So, we are able to see here that Third World women feminists are actually aware of their rights that have been given to them through Islam but are stolen by men. Therefore, they are trying to retain them through their own channels. Thus, Western feminists also have to understand some aspects of the cultural essentialism that takes place in the Arab Muslim countries which have been misunderstood as religious aspects. For instance, Sondra Hale in her article "Gender, Religious Identity, and Political Mobilization in Sudan", mentions in her interview with the feminist Sudanese lawyer Wisal al-Mahdi where al-Mahdi explains her well-known view (she always repeats it in different occasions) on female equality through the following statement:

We know our rights; we have learned the Quran and Sharia; we know what Sharia gives us... we are standing up for our sex. We are as equal... as efficient... as educated... as good... and as great as men (*apud* Hamdi, p.160).

So, if Western feminists were able to treat the limitations they have in the areas of geopolitics, religious practices and gender inequality in the Third World and specifically in Arab Muslim countries their contributions would have been welcomed and also to a certain extent successful. Therefore, I see the importance of having Western feminists cooperate with Third World women feminists in their solidarity to correct their status in their societies. Nevertheless, this kind of cooperation, as Mohanty explains, must be based on suitable theoretical and practical approaches that mainly depend on intersectionality in which women are constructed in a "variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another" (MCS, p.407). Intersectionality, a concept which has already been mentioned briefly in this paper, is a term that has been in use since the early 1990s. It refers to the "intersection" of various types of subordination or oppression – for example, gender and racial oppression. An understanding of these various forms of subordination leads to a more accurate and therefore powerful description

of them. Intersectionality is a flexible concept and allows one to examine both the commonalities and the particularities of intersecting forms of oppression, and as such, it has the potential to promote a complex understanding across cultural barriers. Cultural patterns of oppression are interrelated and mutually influenced by “intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity” (Collins, 2000, pg. 42).

Judith Butler responds to Mohanty’s call for the need of an intersectional approach and optimistically explains that there could be a chance now for “international coalition” that should be modeled on new modes of cultural translation, and would be different from appreciating this or that position or asking for recognition in ways that assume that we are all fixed and frozen in our various locations and “subject – positions” (p.47). Therefore, it is appropriate for Western feminists to help Third World feminist movements in organizing themselves and in providing those who live in poor countries with sufficient funding.

It is important to remember that in order for any change to be accepted by the society members, those who want to change should not neglect the cultural, religious, and traditional cornerstones of the society along with the geopolitical conditions that could have shaped it. Mohanty explains that aspects of progress within feminism cannot be equated with assimilation to Western notions of agency and political mobilization (p.413). She argues that the comparative framework in which first world feminists develop their critique of the conditions of oppression for Third World women on the basis of universal claims not only misreads the agency of Third World women feminists, but also falsely produces a homogeneous conception of who they are and what they want (p.407). So, if feminist scholars would like to help their sisters in the Third World, they need to understand the real sources and reasons of oppression by cooperating with Third World women feminists who are part of that world. Mohanty states that:

It is this particular model that provides a way to theorize a complex relational understanding of experience, location, and history such that feminist cross-cultural work moves through the specific context to construct a real notion of the universal and of democratization rather than colonization. It is through this model that we can put into practice the idea of "common differences" as the basis for deeper solidarity across differences and unequal power relations (Under Western Eyes: Revisited, p.518).

So, in order for Western feminists to help their Third World sisters in their solidarity to achieve gender equality it is important for them to take into consideration the different geopolitical,

cultural, and religious, specificities that had shaped that part of the world. An Arabic proverb states that “judging a thing should be the sequence of deeply knowing it”. Mohanty, in her essay also claims that it is scholars’ responsibility for really knowing the Third World before critically engaging in its feminist issues.

What can Western feminists do to truly further the cause of women’s empowerment movements worldwide, including in the Muslim world? It would appear that the key is avoiding the tendency to essentialize or totalize the experience of women of an unfamiliar culture. As a visible, outward sign of and identity often perceived as oppressive, the headscarf has become a symbol of an oppressed state of being in which women’s social participation and freedom to present themselves as they wish is thought to be limited. However, the dangers of concentrating on this particular aspect of culture as a symbol are manifold, as outlined here. The insistence upon the headscarf as a symbol obscures its real social meaning and use. Moreover, it may deflect attention from more relevant issues. Western feminists in the 1970s famously states that the personal is political – that is, that the small, personal manifestations of the performance of gender as socially mandated are in fact politically influenced and mandated acts. In considering the situation of women of other cultures, however, Western feminists would do well to avoid an over-dependence on that axiom. The personal is, above all, personal, and must be open to individual interpretation, just as Muslim women can and must decide for themselves what the veil means, and whether they wish to wear it. For those observing from the outside, such an individual interpretation of the wearing of the veil is, perhaps, more difficult to understand than a homogenized symbol of oppression. However, it has the advantage of being authentic and a potential gateway to genuine understanding – a process that is not finite, but broadly encompassing and continuously evolving.

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