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Talking Back to White Feminism: An Intersectional Review
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Abstract:
Feminism, despite being a lens through which we are meant to deconstruct oppressive assumptions, is all too often complicit in the Othering thinking that subjugates non-white and “Third World” peoples. The third-wave term “white feminism” addresses this white- and Western-centricity, critiquing the discourse’s tendency to, while liberating women of the white middle class, perpetuate the subjugation of women of colour in the West and across the globe. This literature review summarizes “Difference: A Special Third-World Women’s Issue” (1987) by Trinh T. Minh-Ha and “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Postcolonial Discourses” (1988) by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, two foundational postcolonial texts that discuss Western feminist discourse’s tendency to speak for and, in doing so, silence women of colour. The review provides modern-day examples of racism within mainstream Western feminism and calls upon white feminists to listen to women of colour, not speak for them, in order to build an inclusive, justice-based movement.

Keywords:
Islamophobia, Feminism, Intersectionality, Orientalism, Solidarity

It is perhaps obvious at this point in the development of postcolonial theory to state that Western thought, even among the most reputable academics, is dominated by binaries. At the roots of every black/white, male/female, rich/poor mutually constitutive distinction is the notion of Us vs. Them. Edward Said in Orientalism (1978) asserts that this framework of opposition was enormously weaponized, including and especially academically, by European colonizers; imperialist scholarship, as a product of imperialist society, was inextricably political and servile to colonial power. To justify their goal of conquering, its scholars helped to create the contagious and self-replicating concept of the Other: that mysterious, dark-skinned, animalistic sub-human – from North Africa? The Middle East? Did it matter? – whose culture, whose values, whose appearance would for centuries be understood only in comparison to the Western ideal of the white European man and through Eurocentric scholarship.

Feminism, despite being a lens through which we are meant to deconstruct oppressive assumptions, is all too often complicit in the Othering thinking that subjugates non-white and “Third World” peoples. This complicity formed the basis for the third-wave term “white feminism,” which refers to the white-centricity and Western domination of feminist discourse – a discourse which, while liberating the women of the white middle class, often neglects and silences women of colour in the West and across the globe. As Mikki Kendall, pop culture analyst and editor of Hoodfeminism.com, famously tweeted in 2013, “Solidarity is for white women.”

One of the major ways in which white feminism perpetuates the oppression of women of colour is its tendency to speak for them – to define their struggles from a Western perspective and to view them as a singular, monolithic entity rather than a vast, heterogeneous array of cultures and individuals. “Difference: A Special Third World Women’s Issue” (1987) by Trinh T. Minh-ha and “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1988) by Chandra Talpade Mohanty are two foundational texts of postcolonial feminist discourse that explore this conflict. The texts use wholly different methods: Minh-ha employs a radical structure to demonstrate radical thought, while Mohanty adheres to scholarly conventions and clear, approachable analysis. Despite the writers’ skillful deliveries, these issues persist to this day: in talking back to the centre, marginalized women of colour are still too often forced to talk back to the centre of feminism itself.
Trinh T. Minh-ha: “Difference” and linguicism in white feminist scholarship

In “Difference: A Special Third World Women’s Issue,” Trinh T. Minh-ha outlines numerous ways in which non-white and “Third World” women are frequently Othered in social interaction. More specifically, Minh-ha critiques Western feminist academia’s role in this exclusion. In her largely informal yet powerful piece, Minh-ha catalogues each method of Othering as a disjointed section which can operate autonomously or as a link in the chain of this renowned postcolonial text.

For the purposes of this review, I am most interested in Minh-ha’s opening section, which asserts that the linguicism with which white feminism operates is one of the colonial tools that forces women of colour to be spoken for. Minh-ha introduces this assertion by describing a common dilemma faced by women of colour as they confront white feminism’s prioritization of institutionalized (i.e: accepted as proper within Western hegemonic discourse) language: either subscribe to the oppressors’ standards of language, perhaps being listened to, but never overthrowing the status quo; or take your words into your own hands, thereby writing radically, but risking being largely ignored and invalidated. This dilemma, a colonizing tool, is perpetuated by white feminism’s exclusionary reaction to the latter option of radical writing. Minh-ha contends, “Difference is not difference to some ears, but awkwardness or incompleteness. Aphasia. Unable or unwilling?” (6). Here, Minh-ha argues that white feminism, in regarding feminist texts written in Western scholarly language as the feminism which is most legitimate and valuable, not only excludes the voices of women of colour, but invalidates them. In this way, white feminism subscribes to the same colonial, patriarchal standards it presumes to dismantle.

Minh-ha is spot on. After all, most of the world’s women, for numerous intersecting reasons including but not limited to their race and class, cannot access the academic spaces that produce this institutionalized language. Moreover, non-Native English speakers, scholars or not, may still not use “proper English” in their works. If propriety is defined by hegemonic white, Western scholarship, where does that leave women of colour but still on the margins, denied their autonomy, unable to “talk back” to a discourse that speaks about them but not with them? In response to this invalidation, Minh-ha takes a clear stance on the dilemma with which she opened the section, calling upon her sisters to speak radically by using their own voices. She says,

You who understand … the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try to keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don’t, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (6)

In this instance, Minh-ha, though she empathizes with her sisters’ fears of “being said,” warns that for a woman of colour to adhere to Western scholarly language is humiliation and falsification. It is to unsay an experience – to inadequately say it. It is, she proposes, to comply with the oppressors’ expectations.

Minh-ha then goes on to define other barriers hoisted onto women of colour by white feminism, each description as harrowing as the last. She criticizes how women of colour are treated first as resources about their race and second (if at all) as people, asking, “Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on … being the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone’s private zoo” (7). By comparing herself and her sisters of colour to animals gawked at by spectators, yet giving the white “Someone” a capital-letter human identity, Minh-ha illustrates the dehumanization and deindividualization with which women of colour are treated within Western academia. When she references particular women’s stories – such as that of Nellie Wong, who was treated by white feminists as a “purveyor of resource lists” (qtd. in Minh-ha 7) – Minh-ha resists this deindividualization. She observes that white feminists are all too quick to ask her about racism, rather than doing their own research (7-8); to view racism and exploitation of non-Western countries as fringe issues, and thus ignore them (11-12); and to treat certain “acceptable” women of colour as “special,” singular representatives, thereby dividing them from their sisters and encouraging their complicity in colonial structures (12-13) – all methods of excusing the laziness and ignorance with which white feminism speaks for and about women of colour.
Minh-ha’s text is powerful not only in its deeply personal descriptions, but in her implementation of a radical, if difficult to interpret, essay style. A formal essay structure, containing a definitive thesis and premises, is nowhere to be found. Her tone is irrefutably informal, directly criticizing and even mocking white feminism’s scholars. Imitating white feminists who expect women of colour to do research for them, she asks, “Shall I quench my thirst gazing at the plums while waiting for my helper to come by and pluck them off the branches for me?” (8). Furthermore, her colloquial, in-crowd, even elusive method of description – “You who understand … You know” (6) – requires that white feminists, who are privileged and therefore perceptually hindered by the same standards that obscure Minh-ha and her sisters of colour, find themselves out of the loop, working to understand. Her prompt disconnections between topics, illustrated in her use of black line dividers rather than connecting statements, jar her readers, necessitating that they play close attention, lest they become lost in the rapid topic changes. By employing these techniques, Minh-ha, with wild success, follows the advice she provides to her sisters: she speaks radically in her own voice, not the voice of the Western academic. As Audre Lorde, quoted in Minh-ha’s introduction, famously observes (my italics),

Survival is not an academic skill … It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (“Master’s Tools” 99)

In “Difference: A Special Third World Women’s Issue,” Minh-ha surely rejects the master’s tools and exemplifies how her sisters might do the same.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty: The “Third World Woman” in western eyes

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in stark contrast with Minh-ha’s “Difference,” is an easy read for a Western academic. Using the language to which Western feminist scholarship is already accustomed – not, perhaps, what Minh-ha would encourage – Mohanty addresses how this scholarship reduces the enormously diverse cultures and experiences of women of colour into the compact, singular, and reductive idea of the “Third World Woman.” White feminism fails, argues Mohanty, in its ethnocentricity. The West is consistently the “primary referent in theory and praxis” (334), resulting in scholarship that speaks about women of colour, but does not invite them to the table. This exclusion – as Minh-ha and numerous other “Third World” women and women of colour have indicated – is a form of subjagation that serves a colonial purpose and is therefore contrary to a feminist search for justice.

Mohanty defines three principles of analysis which she argues are predominantly featured in Western feminist discourse about “Third World” women. The first is the analytical category of “women,” which white feminism too often treats as a coherent, homogeneous group holding “identical interests and desires … which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (337). The second is the faulty or uncritical methods through which Western feminist scholars attempt to prove this universality. The third is the “model of power and struggle” (337), which positions third world women as uniformly and eternally deficient, that these scholars construct. The first two principles of analysis, explains Mohanty, combine to create the third and by extension the Western image of the “Average Third World Woman.” This contrived image is the object of the article’s overarching critique, which is that white feminism allows white women self-presentation, while women of colour must settle for re-presentation.

White feminism’s Third World Woman, according to Mohanty, is represented as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized, etc.” (337). Compare this characterization to the same discourse’s implicit construction of the Western white woman as “educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies … and the freedom to make their own decisions” (337). The definition of women of colour and “third world” women, though it presents itself as sensitive and concerned, is an act of subjagation in itself: we as white, Western feminists not only view these women in predominantly deficient terms, but we are the ones driving that narrative. “Third World” women, it
seems, are worthy of our charity, of photographs on our brochures and on the covers of our books, but not of involvement in our conversation. This Third World Woman does not exist in a vacuum; our feminist scholarship affects and reflects its intertexts, many of which are colonial. Mohanty observes,

[Feminist scholarship] is a political practice which counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old “legitimate” and “scientific” bodies of knowledge. Thus, feminist scholarly practices … are inscribed in relations of power – relations which they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship. (334)

The diction and rhetoric with which Mohanty constructs her arguments are approachable and understandable. She thoroughly explains each of the three Western feminist analytical principles and then substantiates them through examples of numerous articles by Western feminist scholars. Mohanty then challenges the supposed validity of these scholars’ claims by providing perspectives from the women about whom the articles speak. In one example, Fran Hosken (1981) assumes that the prevalence of veils, such as the hijab, across non-Western cultures is an overt sign of sexual control over women, identical regardless of which veil or culture. Mohanty addresses this assumption as follows:

While there may be a physical similarity in the veils worn by women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the specific meaning attached to this practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context. For example, as is well known, Iranian middle class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution [in] solidarity with their working class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, mandatory Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils. (347)

Here, Mohanty clearly demonstrates that two instances of a supposedly uniform image hold vastly different connotations, despite being only 11 years apart and in the same country. What we white, Western feminists so often believe from our outsider perspective to be a sign of oppression may from an inside perspective be a “well known” sign of resistance and sisterhood; by asserting our perspective to be empirical rather than limited, we infringe upon the agency of the Third World Women about whom we speak. Homa Hoodfar’s “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women,” published 4 years after Mohanty’s piece, shares Mohanty’s concerns about the veil in particular. She states,

Failing to contextualize non-Western societies adequately, many researchers simply assume that what is good for Western middle-class women should be good for all other women…. All members of the Muslim community, and in particular veiled women, are suffering the psychological and socio-economic consequences of these views. (5)

Western scholarship is central to knowledge production about “third-world women;” if Western feminism is to be truly radical, Mohanty and Hoodfar suggest, we must make space for the knowledge produced on the margins and challenge the oppressive scholarship produced within our own circles.

Listen up: The (correct) white feminist response

Many white, Western feminists, particularly those who are new to postcolonial texts, might now turn up their noses to Mohanty’s piece, calling it institutionalized and complicit in colonialism – at least in the context of Minh-ha’s precedent. Reverse the two: were Mohanty’s piece presented first, might these feminists not be just as quick to label Minh-ha’s brash or overreactive? To again quote Lorde, “I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, ‘Tell me how you feel, but do not say it too harshly, or I cannot hear you.’ But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?” (“Anger” 124). Here, Lorde indicates that for white,
Western feminists to police the tone of women of colour, whether to say they are too radical or too complicit, is to reaffirm our privilege: it assumes that those who benefit from racism are better equipped to describe and to resist its oppressive experiences than those who are actually oppressed by it. To read these articles in juxtaposition, then, is perhaps an exercise in listening to, rather than speaking for, women of colour and accepting, rather than invalidating, the differences in their words – even if those words are uncomfortable for us to hear.

It may perplex some readers to notice that I call upon them currently to build an inclusive movement, yet I discuss texts which are over two decades old. After all, aren’t we – according to some ever-present teleological progress narrative dictated by the West – living in a post-racial society? Do all women not now share the same patriarchal subjugations? The answer is a resounding no. The age of these texts, if anything, further justifies a critique of white feminism: over 20 years have passed since Minh-ha published “Difference” and Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” yet the issues they detail are still absolutely relevant in Western feminist circles.

Minh-ha’s critique of white feminism as linguicist is echoed by Namsoon Kang in Diasporic Feminist Theology: Asia and the Theopolitical Imagination (2014). Kang wisely observes that language should be added to the discursive axes (gender, sexuality, etc.) through which feminism operates because it “permeates every sector of our reality today” and forms the basis for “all knowledge production and reproduction” (177). One modern example of linguicism is the continuing frequency with which Westerners, including feminists, view African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a degenerate form of English that signifies a lack of intelligence in its speakers, despite its grammatical nuance and complexity (Susan J. Dicker 7-8). In the spoken-word poem “3 Ways to Speak English,” feminist activist and youth mentor Jamila Lyiscott challenges the microaggressive, backhanded “compliment” she often receives from white people, including feminists: “You’re so articulate,” she argues, is often code for “You don’t speak like those other black folk.” She says,

I know that I had to borrow your language
Because mines was stolen
But you can’t expect me to speak your history wholly
While Mines is Broken.
These words are spoken
By someone who is simply fed up
With the Eurocentric ideals of the season
And the reason I speak a composite version of your language
Is because mines was ripped away
Along with my history. (2014)

By writing partially in AAVE, Lyiscott, like Minh-ha, subscribes to radical communication.

Mohanty’s call for white, Western feminists to more diligently contextualize the lives of “third-world” women, lest we perpetuate their oppression, also remains relevant today; here, I will discuss Islamophobia. Many of the islamophobic ideologies echoed by contemporary feminists are catalogued by the #lifeofamuslimfeminist Twitter hashtag. According to its creator, Noorulan Shahid, this hashtag was written in response to the “hostile” environment of mainstream Western feminism, which is “dominated by white feminists who [have] lots of misconceptions regarding Islam and the hijab [and who] shun minority groups” (qtd. in Graham). Users of the hashtag report that white, Western feminists often insist that hijabis are incapable of standing up for themselves, that Muslim women must be educated about the supposed incompatibility of Islam and feminism, and that Islam is a force from which women must be “freed” (Nashrulla). These behaviours surely perpetuate the image of the Third World Woman Mohanty criticizes; they suggest that Muslim women are submissive, ignorant, and uniformly victimized. By proclaiming ourselves purveyors of justice, imposing reductive and oppressive images onto groups to which we do not belong, white, Western feminists continue to deny Muslim women the agency that we so often demand.
A more extreme example of Islamophobic Western feminism is FEMEN, a radical feminist group known for their topless protests who, according to their website, aim to “instill in modern women [a] culture of active opposition to evil and of struggle for justice” (Femen.org n.d.). Despite their supposed fight for justice and, like the feminists criticized in “Under Western Eyes,” they explicitly vilify and dehumanize Islam without nuance or context. They notoriously label the hijab a symbol of violent oppression (Kolsy) and even dress up as racist Arab caricatures with symbols from the Quran drawn on their breasts (Nelson). In a 2013 Facebook post, they referred to Muslims as “inhuman beasts for whom killing a woman is more natural than recognizing her right to do as she pleases with her own body” (qtd. in Nelson). FEMEN frequently insist that they intend to “liberate” Muslim women, yet many of these women actively condemn FEMEN’s actions. In April 2013, the feminist group Muslim Women Against FEMEN (MWAF) organized Muslimah Pride Day in response to FEMEN’s Topless Jihad Day (see Garibaldi), an event that occurred on April 4th, 2013 near mosques and Tunisian Embassies across Europe (see Nelson) and is perhaps too obviously Islamophobic to warrant explanation. MWAF’s critique of FEMEN, like Mohanty’s of the white feminism of her contemporaries, is clear and approachable. In a 2013 interview with IBtimes UK, MWAF states,

Muslim women have always stood up for themselves. We don’t need FEMEN and their saviour complex …. FEMEN does not represent a large number of Muslim women, although they claim they want to ‘free’ us from our religion. They argue for liberation and speak for us but do it in the wrong way …. For them, the more you strip, the more of a feminist you are – that’s Western feminist ideology. That’s not liberation for us, but that doesn’t make us anti-feminist. (Bacchi)

Like Mohanty, MWAF clearly criticizes the narrow assumption that what is good for white, Western, middle-class women is good for all women across the globe.

In the context of these texts and events, it is all too evident that contemporary Western feminism, though it supposedly seeks to liberate all women, often prioritizes the white and the Western, both as speakers of the “right” language and activists of the “right” actions and attitudes. In doing so, it perpetuates the colonial binary of Us vs. Them. All white feminists benefit from the movement’s racist characteristics, and it is therefore our responsibility to proactively dismantle these inequalities. We must, if I may be colloquial, “check our privilege,” as we so often call men to do. We must listen to women of colour, not speak for them, and certainly not become defensive against accusations of racism, if we are to build a justice-based movement. Minh-ha and Mohanty, like Lyiscott and MWAF, approach their exclusions from this discourse very differently, but it is not the place of white feminists to deem which approach is the more correct or appealing; rather, we must accept each of them as valid – as different responses from different women to different subjugations perpetrated by a totalizing colonial system which we as white feminists are so often guilty of perpetrating.

**Bibliography**


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