Religion, Rights and The Politics of Transnational Feminism in Bangladesh

CENISEAS PAPERS
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DINA M SIDDIQI

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR

Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies

OMEO KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT
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Series Editor's Note

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS]: to develop an understanding of North-east India in the context of its transnational neighbourhood, i.e. countries conventionally described as being a part of South Asia, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal as well as countries of Southeast Asia such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia. The papers grow out of lectures, seminars and other events at the Centre. This paper by Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi was the basis of first of the CENISEAS seminar series. It was the first event held in the new Second Floor Seminar Space of the OKD Institute in Guwahati on November 4th 2003.

One of the goals of CENISEAS is to create a space for academics, journalists and public intellectuals of the transnational neighbourhood to interact. The porous nature of the international borders of Northeast India is often commented upon and border-crossings — legal and illegal — are indeed both easy and frequent. Yet there is a striking absence of conversations across the international borders of the region in the public domain. Even when it comes to policy challenges that are inherently transnational in scope there is an absence of inputs from across the borders in policy debates. Our transnational neighbours are very close, yet very far. CENISEAS wishes to make a contribution to changing

the situation.

We hope that the fast changing geopolitical environment will facilitate such interaction. We may be on the cusp of a period of closer regional cooperation among the countries of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation [SAARC] following the successful 12th summit meeting in Islamabad that saw the thawing of Indo-Pakistani relations and the signing of a framework agreement for a South Asia Free Trade Area. India's Look East policy — of seeking closer relations with the countries of Southeast Asia — is beginning to show results. India and leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] now hold annual summit meetings. With Myanmar as member ASEAN is now next door to Northeast India. ASEAN and India are working towards a free trade agreement. The completion of a number of infrastructure building projects in Myanmar and Northeast India — that are either being designed or are under construction — will intensify the formal and informal economic links between Northeast India, Southeast Asia and Southwest China.

Given our interest in the idea of transnationalism and in facilitating interaction within Northeast India's transnational neighbourhood we invited Bangladeshi women's activist and scholar, Dr. Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi to speak in the CENISEAS seminar series. We appreciate her agreeing to speak on a topic that is of particular relevance to our intellectual mission. Unfortunately because of a family health emergency Dr. Siddiqi had to cancel her travel plans in the last minute. However, she was kind enough to send us her paper and her spouse Professor David Ludden very kindly agreed to present the paper on her behalf and to lead the discussion that followed.

Dr.Siddiqi's paper is of interest to us in Northeast India both for (a) her critical appraisal of the state of women's studies in Bangladesh and its implications for social science scholarship under conditions of donor-driven contract research, and (b) her explication of the implications of transnationalism for feminism and other emanicipatory projects. Women were "the invisible half of the population" in Bangladesh during the early years of the nation in the 1970s. But today they are "hypervisible" in Dr. Siddiqi's words, at least if one goes by the media coverage of women's issues. Yet she believes that there are serious shortcomings of women's studies in Bangladesh. Most research is framed by a narrow set of questions associated with the "women in development" literature. There is what she calls "a depoliticised and ahistorical understanding" of women's lives and there is little impact of postcolonial and transnational feminist thinking. And particularly striking from our cross-border point of view, there is little reference to work by Indian feminists in women's studies in Bangladesh.

Donor-driven contract research, according to Dr. Siddiqi, creates an endless demand for appraisal and evaluation studies necessary for the administration of development projects. In this environment Bangladeshi social scientists have got involved in an externally generated research agenda that is limited in scope and lacks academic rigour. There is a "sanitized" view of development and there is little reference to the impact of structural adjustment, globalisation, or international labour markets on the everyday lives of women. Thus Bangladeshi feminists have not yet debated whether the much-celebrated micro credit of the Grameen Bank empowers women and give them fulfilment.

India's developmental regime is very different from Bangladesh's and because of the tighter rules on the operations of international non-governmental organizations, Northeast India so far has been by and large spared the kind of donor-driven contract research that Siddiqi criticizes. However, the advent of liberaliza-

tion and globalisation — along with its benefits — might also create conditions for the proliferation of donor-driven contract research. Dr. Siddiqi's views about its pitfalls may be a timely warning for social scientists in Northeast India.

What are the implications of transnationalism for Bangladeshi feminism? Dr. Siddiqi's argues that today's transnational moment provides an opportunity for understanding "the ways in which political economy and cultural politics converge to shape women's everyday realities." For instance, it may facilitate a critical view of what the late Pierre Bourdieu called the "imperialism of universalism." Thus while in the history of western capitalist democracies, women's entry into paid labour force may have been a road to freedom, women's visibility in the public sphere may or may not be the road to women's emancipation in Bangladesh.

Dr. Siddiqi calls for a break from United Nations-style feminism that is wedded to the discourse of human rights. Yet hers is not a voice of cultural relativism; it is not her argument that human rights is a western concept and thus inapplicable to Bangladesh. "That line of thinking," she emphasizes, "especially where it concerns women's rights, is very dangerous and plays right into the hands of the most conservative and reactionary sections of society. Nor is the argument an apology for any particular religion or custom." She makes her political point crisply: "How do we refuse relativism and confront power, without acceding to universalism?" Since the representation of Muslim societies today is implicated in "larger global relations of power," it is especially necessary for feminists in Bangladesh to be sensitive to the politics of representation. The transnational perspective, she writes, creates the condition for an "emanicipatory feminist epistemology" that takes difference seriously and can accept that desire itself may be structured differently in different cultural-political configurations.

I am grateful to Dr. Siddiqi for a stimulating paper that is especially appropriate for our purposes: for carrying CENISEAS's intellectual mission forward.

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Religion, Rights and the Politics of Transnational Feminism in Bangladesh

> One is still defending reason when one fights those who mask their abuses of power under the appearance of reason or who use the weapons of reason to consolidate or justify an arbitrary empire (Pierre Bourdieu 1999: 19).

> One of the effects of globalization over the last two decades has been a new visibility of women's issues on the world stage. Witness the large numbers of international conferences on topics like violence against women, women's health, reproductive rights and "population control." At the same time, *feminism has been quantified for consumption within the global marketplace of ideas* (we call this "freemarket feminism") (Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty 1997: xv, emphasis added).

Introduction

In the wake of postmodern, postcolonial and transnational theories, there have been considerable upheavals in the feminist canon. There has also been an increasing gap between feminist theory and politics. How, if at all, have the ensuing challenges, interruptions or disruptions actually affected the production of

knowledge about women? And of what relevance or utility are shifting epistemologies to feminist activists? In this paper, I try to answer these questions with regard to the situation in Bangladesh. I am most interested in the possibilities for intervention opened up by feminist readings of postcolonial theory and by transnational feminist practices.

My critique is informed by an understanding that "theory is part of historical structure and conjuncture and therefore constitutes the problematic being researched (Aijaz Ahmad cited in Ramamurthy, 2000: 240)." Given the conditions of globalization in a unipolar world order, development, progress and individual freedom are associated more than ever with western capitalist modernity. At the same time, struggles over economic and political resources increasingly manifest themselves in or are displaced onto, struggles over culture, tradition, religion and women's place in preserving or betraying their traditions and customs. Culture - what it means, who polices it and who can claim it as her own - has become a global battleground; and culture warriors on every side now wield women's bodies as a primary weapon of war. Feminist knowledge practices consequently bear a fraught political burden. What difference, if any, have these conditions made to academic and activist understandings of women's lived realities in Bangladesh?

Benetton Feminism?

Liberal feminism of various persuasions[1] has dominated the politics of feminism in the United States and in Bangladesh, the

1 Famously exemplified by those classic texts of the 1960's and 70's: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global*. The title of the latter book became an early rallying cry of the white bourgeois feminist movement as it went global.

two sites to which I will limit my comments here.[2] My focus on liberal feminism (as opposed to radical or socialist feminism) stems from the understanding that the former has been and continues to be the most influential intellectual paradigm for feminists in Bangladesh. Liberal feminists of the Women In Development (WID) school are primarily responsible for international policy making on gender issues. Indeed, it was the lobbying of WID activists in the US Congress in 1973 that led to passage of the Percy Amendment, mandating all United States Agency for International Development (USAID) projects to pay special attention to women's issues. The rethinking of gender and development policy since then has not moved away appreciably from the liberal model or the implicit equation between development, modernity and the West. As is well-known, WID thought was shaped originally by the insights and premises of Esther Boserup's 1970 book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*. The approach called for greater equity between men and women. It was very much a welfare approach, without a reassessment of the development process or of the western/orientalist gender stereotypes that informed dominant development discourse. WID has come under considerable scrutiny from feminists for its complicity in reproducing structures of domination.[3] The Women and Development (WAD) school that challenged WID thought was based, in contrast, on a women's separate sphere model. The trend since then has been to emphasize arguments about basic needs and efficiency so that both

2 See Ramamurthy 2000 p. 243.

3 The feminism that informs the WID discourse descends directly from Victorian colonial feminism. Tradition and social constraints are identified as barriers to women's access to the market. Women's emancipation will come through modernization and integration into industrial capitalism. As in colonial literature, it is the oppression of women that justifies the need for development intervention (the barefoot and preg-

development and improvements in women's status can be combined. The currently fashionable Gender and Development (GAD) framework takes on more contemporary theories of gender construction. As the name suggests, it focuses on gender rather than on women, and on the social construction of gendered roles and relations. However, most proponents of GAD do not question the ultimate goals of westernization or modernization.[4]

The master narrative of liberal feminism draws on Enlightenment principles and focuses on the individual actor, her freedom of choice and her legal rights to equality. In the US, African-American, Latina and lesbian women have subsequently challenged the universality of theories derived from the experiences of white, middle-class heterosexual women (see Spelman 1988). US critiques of bourgeois feminism have forcefully underscored the exclusionary and partial nature of such theorising in the name of all women. Such critiques have created spaces for the incorporation of race, class and sexuality into gender analyses. Unfortunately, *with notable exceptions*, most of the scholarship remains firmly, if unconsciously, located within a narrow nationalist framework. The American preoccupation with racial/ethnic "difference" or what has come to be called multiculturalism has all too often been played out as parochial identity politics whose parameters are based on the logic of US exceptionalism. The focus on racial/ethnic identities has frequently displaced considerations of class and inequal-

nant imagery justifying experimentation with Norplant and IUDs). In this genre of development discourse, poverty carries the same burden as sati, the veil or genital mutilation - symbols of patriarchal oppression that must be eradicated if women are to be liberated. The third world woman is again judged in reference to the emancipated First World Woman: who is autonomous, economically independent, free of traditional constraints and obligations (Barker 2000:181)."

4 See Kabeer 1991; Marchand and Parpart Introduction.

ity, global and local. Categories of race, class and gender (the invocation of which is considered de rigueur today) are constructed without much consideration of international political economy or of histories of global capitalism as they are implicated in the production of difference and inequality.

In short, the move away from the homogenizing tendencies of classic liberalism and into cultural relativism leaves intact questions of power and complicity, of how knowledge, feminist or otherwise, is produced or of the stakes involved. Not surprisingly then, the turn to multiculturalism in most Women's Studies programs in the US limits itself to what I call Benetton Feminism: the production and consumption of a multi-color all inclusive catalogue of women's lives "elsewhere." History, politics and power-relationality — are notably absent from such analyses. The effect is to reaffirm the essential subjecthood and concerns of the universal Woman across the globe, and to reinscribe gender as the primary axis of inequality. It follows that many of the questions raised by the relentlessly individualist and legal rights oriented feminism of the US simply don't speak to issues that concern populations outside the country.[5]

5 The abortion debates come to mind immediately. For many women, the individual's "right" to choice is meaningless, when the nation states of which they are citizens frequently coerce them into abortions or dubious contraceptive measures — in the name of development, reproductive rights and female emancipation. In addition, the stridently universalizing tone of this discourse can be disconcerting and alienating to those on the outside. Here is how one Australian feminist recalls her first experience of a women's rally in the US. "I went to the US believing I knew it intimately from the flood of films, television programs and academic books that pervade Australian popular culture. Yet I felt battered and cut adrift by the assertiveness and the anger, by the incessant refrain of rights and freedom. This fashion of feminism was unfamiliar to me." Bulbeck, 1998: 5. .

Postmodern and poststructuralist critiques offer somewhat different and potentially more productive paradigms.[6] At their best, they disrupt binarisms and unveil the constructedness of longstanding taken-for-granted hierarchies, thereby forcing a re-appraisal of the relationship between language/discourse, power and feminist knowledge (see Weedon 1987). Poststructuralist theorists such as Donna Haraway, Joan Scott and Judith Butler have offered significant analyses of the centrality of gender to the production of systems of difference and hierarchy. They have also provided powerful insights into the making of multiple subjectivities that constitute the human self.

For feminist theorists in the US and elsewhere, the epistemic challenge to the existence of a unitary/universal female subject posed by poststructuralism - the problem of multiple subjectivities — remains a thorny issue. Critics claim that, carried to an extreme, the denial of a shared essence or identity among women undermines the very subject matter of feminist politics. This "crisis in feminism" pits those who embrace some form of a shared identity among all women on the basis of common experiences (social, psychological or biological) against those who consider woman to be a wholly contingent and normative category. Consequently, what constitutes feminist politics, or feminism itself, is no longer clear. Difference and Sameness, Universalism versus Cultural Relativism — these dichotomies continue to vex Anglo-American

6 These two terms refer to bodies of thought that are tremendously complex, diverse and often conflicting. I am aware of the drawbacks involved in using these terms as a kind of short hand since there are almost as many definitions of postmodernism as there are theorists of postmodernity. For the purposes of this paper, I take as paradigmatic that, whatever the specifics, the two 'posts' question the "truth" of metanarratives and the notion of a unitary self-aware subject capable of unimpeded "free choice."

feminist theory and politics.[7]

A frequent charge, especially in the South, is that postmodern/poststructuralist thought is a sign of elite indulgence and quite irrelevant to most women's lives. Undeniably, an exclusive focus on reading, and playing on, the multiple meanings embedded in literary texts cannot be productive for feminist politics. Even when poststructuralist feminist theorists attend to history (which most don't), the question of imperialism frequently drops out.[8] Nevertheless, a generalized postmodern celebration of difference or immersion in language — stripped of politics, history and power — must be differentiated from feminist interventions that take seriously the contingent and constructed nature of the subject. One must also ask what is at stake and for whom. The so-called crisis of feminism may be more acute among elite women (upper class/upper caste/western) who have long been used to occupying an authorizing position in the production of feminist knowledge.

The universalism/relativism debates are as critical, if not more so, for feminist politics in the South even if the stakes are somewhat different. As indicated earlier, third world women's bodies inhabit a specific and critical terrain in global cultural politics today. This terrain is marked by a hegemonic human rights discourse in which the cultural rights of a community are frequently depicted as standing in the way of the human rights of its female members. So it is that female circumcision, veiling, sati, etc. are

7 **As one scholar notes:**
[Feminism] is faced with the theoretical problem of moving away from a priori universalizing of women' s condition to the possibility of generalizing the actual conditions of women's lives and the related political problem of de-essentializing women while retaining woman as a category to facilitate progressive politics. (Ramamurthy, 2000:252).

8 Chris Weedon's well-known overview, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory,* published in 1987, is a case in point.

the cultural (read third world) villains of the moment, poised against the forces of a modernist (read western) and universal feminism. In this world, women's status marks the boundaries between modernity and tradition/barbarity, civility and its lack.

Given the actual conditions of most women's lives, universalizing the tenets of "global" feminism would appear to be a highly desirable goal. However, it is precisely at this juncture that a slippage between imperialism and feminism occurs. The feminism embedded in human rights discourse views culture as a monolithic, static and overdetermining entity, emblematic of (third world) women's oppression. Emptied of history and politics, Culture implicitly stands for that with which the "non-west" is burdened, in contrast to Reason, a quality possessed by the "west." Global feminism unproblematically embraces categories whose meanings are by no means transparent, uncontested or immutable. When culture and rights are evoked as monolithic constructs, questions of power and history are bound to fall through the cracks. What goes by the name of global feminist discourse is invariably local, context-specific and interest-laden.

A recent critique from three US based scholars poses some incisive questions in a slightly different but related register:

> The persistent blind spot within much feminist work that attempts to globalize feminism [...] is that which characterizes the UN-style feminism that is an adjunct of the UN Conferences on women — the feminism that has in recent years wed itself to the discourse of human rights. As critics of the post-Beijing mantra—"Women's Rights are Human Rights"—have astutely and persistently asked: *From which national vantage points does such a universalizing human rights agenda emerge? From which segments of the caste and class structure of nation-states does this call come? To whom is it addressed? And on which political traditions does it draw?*
> (Joseph, Ramamurthy and Weinbaum 2001:6, emphasis added)

The questions above demand serious and immediate engagement, not least because feminist discourses in Bangladesh draw heavily on "UN-style" universal feminism. I hasten to add that my objective is not to dismiss all UN activities concerning women. The UN conferences alluded to, for instance, have allowed for unprecedented networking among international feminist activists. They have also compelled many governments to take steps toward the protection of female citizens.

However, a lurking modernist absolutism makes it impossible to acknowledge the contingent histories of power relations or the ways in which dominant cultural values continue to be marked as the normative or standard for judging all other frameworks of action and thought. The highly charged and sensationalized debates over female circumcision offer another example of the complicity of feminism and imperialism.[9] The greatest danger here is that moral outrage — the politics of horror — all too easily replaces historical and economic analysis. The reliance on a language of salvation and a refusal to admit the possibility of difference - in desires as well as in conceptions of justice, freedom and the good life - only leads us back to the hegemonic and imperializing

9 The title of a recent essay by Obioma Nnaemeka, "If Female Circumcision Did not Exist, Western Feminists Would Invent it" encapsulates the frustration felt by many Southern feminists on the selectivity and instrumentalism with which such topics are usually dealt (in Perry and Schenck 2001). For an excellent discussion on the politics of female circumcision, see Christine Walley 1997.

figure of the liberated western (or for that matter the upper class/ caste non-western) woman (see Abu-Lughod 2002). Such a move exemplifies the "imperialism of universalism" a phrase coined by Pierre Bourdieu in a different but related context (Bourdieu 1998:19). In the next section, which might seem a little bit of a digression, I offer an example of the workings of imperialism dressed up as universalism.

The Woman Question as Alibi:
The Politics of Human Rights Discourse in the New World Order

In the days following the attacks on the World Trade Center in September of 2001, as preparations to bomb Afghanistan were reaching a high point, I noticed a curious phenomenon in the New York Times. All of a sudden, women in borkhas were everywhere, sandwiched in between stories of blood and gore, of attacks and counterattacks. Every day a new picture dutifully appeared, usually in full color, and often visually stunning. I began to collect them. I joked to myself that at this rate, they could have a special issue on Afghan fashions. Sure enough, one Sunday issue devoted a whole back page - in multicolor - to borkha fashions from different regions of Afghanistan.

The women in the photographs were always faceless, nameless, and most definitely voiceless. They clearly represented 'she who needed to be saved from the clutches of the Taliban.' The so-called war on terror (and oil supplies) suddenly turned into a war to save Afghan women from their men and their religion. Needless to say, Pashtun tribal culture was generalized to stand for all Muslim culture, and the Afghan women's predicament became iconic of the possible futures of all Muslim women, unless of course some well-meaning power intervened. At once icon and condensed symbol, the visual image of the borkha did not require

much in the way of verbal elaboration. The borkha could speak for itself, or so it appeared, as the ultimate sign of a woman's unfreedom. It was more important than the woman herself.

It is this reductive interpretation of freedom that gives the borkha or the veil its currency and symbolic weight. The contrast, implicitly or explicitly, is between the unfreedom of the Muslim woman under the Taliban and the freedom enjoyed by American women. During the bombing campaign in Afghanistan, a student brought to my attention an advertisement for a perfume reminding American women of their rights and privileges as citizens of the most powerful nation on earth. "You have the right to be free, you have the right to fly, you have the right to laugh, you have the right to flirt" - four slogans accompanied by photographs of carefree young women, all of whom presumably use a perfume called, aptly enough, American Origins. Here we see patriotism and commercialism, fused through the language of human rights, to reassure the American woman of her various 'rights,' of which her unfortunate sisters in Afghanistan were deprived. This is a somewhat blatant attempt to construct US femininity and autonomy in opposition to the subjugation of Muslim women. If during colonialism, European women's self-image as free and superior was constructed directly in opposition to the unfreedom and inferiority of the female colonized other, today's western woman's self-image - normatively speaking - derives as much from the construction of the African, Asian or Muslim Other as inferior.

Once the Taliban came to power, certain North American and European feminists launched a massive and unprecedented campaign to "free" their Afghan sisters from the clutches of the extreme Talibanic brand of Islam. At one point, women across Europe and America were inundated with email petitions asking them to sign on to a global campaign to condemn Taliban policies.

These feminist concern carried an echo of an earlier era but used the more modern language of human rights and the responsibility of all states to protect women's rights. Most of these same women supported the indiscriminate bombing of Afghanistan, since the end result was to save Afghan women from the brutalities of 'extreme Islam.'

What motivated these no-doubt well-meaning feminists to take such an unusual interest in Afghan women in the middle of the 1990s? Why women in Afghanistan, and not Palestine or Rwanda? Why the exclusive focus on the borkha and not on the terrible conditions of famine in Afghanistan that existed at the time? After all, most Afghan women couldn't go to school long before the Taliban came to power. Most had little or no access to education or health care. While the Taliban enforcement of its rules of veiling was brutal, there was no denying that the Mujahidin whom the Taliban replaced in 1996 were equally misogynist and explicitly anti-feminist.[10] Afghan women had been suffering from war, famine and misogyny for years. Yet, international feminists, especially the Feminist Majority, were curiously silent about the very same Afghan women during the 1980s and 1990s. To put in somewhat differently, what questions were glossed over or occluded because of the obsessive focus on the borkha and female segregation? What are the conditions under which structural adjustment policies or mass hunger are not taken to be violations of basic rights but enforced veiling is?

These are not rhetorical or polemical questions but ones that we must confront if we, as feminists and as producers of knowledge, are to avoid being complicit in the structures of domination we claim to fight. These questions are not new, of course. Here I

10 For details on Afghan women's socio-economic conditions before the Taliban take-over, see Valentine Moghadam "Patriarchy, The Taleban and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan" *Women's Studies International Forum*. Volume 25: 1, 2002. Pp. 19-31.

would like to quote at length from an essay by Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, whose response to these questions I have found to be quite instructive.

> Maybe some of these same people might be signing petitions to save African women from genital cutting or Indian women from dowry deaths. However, I do not think it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women - women of cover for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior. I do not know how many feminists who felt good about saving Afghan women from the Taliban are also asking for a global redistribution of wealth or contemplating sacrificing their own consumption radically so that African or Afghan women could have some chance of what I do believe should be a universal human right - the right to freedom from the structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war, the every day rights of having enough to eat, having homes for their families in which to live and thrive, having ways to make decent livings so their children can grow, and having the strength and security to work out, *within their communities and with whatever alliances they want, how to live a good life, which might very well include changing the ways those communities are organized* (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 786, 787, emphasis added).[11]

11 Lila Abu-Lughod "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" In *American Anthropologist*. September 2002, Volume 104:3. Pp. 783-790.

Abu-Lughod makes several important points. First, she reminds us of the entrenched construction of the Third World Female Other as passive victim in need of salvation from western feminists. Indeed, fashions in global feminist politics are often akin to changing trends in ice cream flavors or hemlines — genital cutting, dowry deaths, child trafficking and veiling have all served similar purposes at one point or another. Second, she notes the not so subtle racism and anti-Islamism present in much of the fervor to save Afghan women. Third, and most, important, she opens up some rather vexed questions about human rights, and about cultural relativism versus universalism. Abu-Lughod points to a different vision of freedom, one not beholden one way or the other to the strictures of parda or veiling. She calls instead for reconceptualizing the question of rights, women's and men's that takes into account structural and global conditions of violence and inequality.

We tend to take rights as transparent and given, to assume that the only problem is their implementation or actualization. But human rights discourse is not neutral, it is always politically situated and shaped by various struggles over power. The complicity between human rights discourse, the politics of representation and geo-politics today makes the task of scholarship especially difficult. Those of us whose work involves writing about Muslim communities must keep in mind how our representations are implicated in larger global relations of power.

To say this is not to resort to some absolutist form of cultural relativism, or to ague that the language of rights is exclusively western, and therefore inapplicable to other contexts. That line of thinking, especially where it concerns women's rights, is very dangerous and plays right into the hands the most conservative and reactionary sections of society. Nor is the argument an apology

for any particular religion or custom. What is under discussion here is power, more specifically how geo-political power plays into shaping human rights and feminist agendas and the discourse of saving third world women today. Abu-Lughod avoids making any value judgments - positive or negative - about Afghan or other cultural practices as such, noting instead that it should be up to community members to determine the direction of changes, if any, required in community life.

Postcolonial Remedies? [12]

So does postcolonial theory offer feminists a remedy to this predicament of the imperialism of the universal? Postcolonial scholarship is associated with the intellectual enterprise of third world academics living and working in elite metropolitan sites. The contradictory experience of being in-between, of never quite belonging, features centrally in much postcolonial theorizing. As such, the field has generated charges of complicity with dominant power structures or of simple irrelevance outside its location (Dirlik 1994). The term itself is highly contested and potentially confusing. Minimally, postcolonial refers to the period following colonialism, although pinning down a specific time period for different parts of the world is fraught with complexities. In ideological terms, postcolonial may refer to the enduring legacies of-and resistance

12 I have drawn on Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* for this discussion. Jorge de Alva suggests that postcoloniality should signify not so much subjectivity "after" the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonizing (read subordinating/subjectivizing) discourses and practices. It is in de Alva's spirit of a subject of oppositionality that I have, for heuristic purposes as much as anything else, classified certain scholars as postcolonial in this paper. Cited in Loomba, p. 12.

to-colonialism, especially in the construction of subjectivities. Just what these legacies are, when, where and who they implicate are complicated questions. Detractors note the word's potentially obfuscating effects, for even if formal colonialism is over, many people live under conditions that can only be described as neo-colonialism (McClintock 1992; Shohat 1992). The postcolonial condition is an inadequate descriptor of the contemporary realities of most people in the former colonies. In short, the enunciation of *a* postcolonial condition is at once a homogenizing, apolitical and elitist gesture.

How useful then can a postcolonial framework be to scholars studying something as "prosaic" as women and development (as I do), other than to provide yet another specialized and intimidating vocabulary to master? The response is that certain kinds of scholarship, that I am labeling postcolonial theory for heuristic purposes as much as anything else (and independent of whether individual authors identify themselves that way), allows for the unmasking of what's been called the 'epistemic violence' of imperialism (Spivak 1988). It is precisely because colonialism is not over that it is necessary to trace the effects of imperialism - the continuities and ruptures in discursive, ideological and material practices — in the contemporary world. Indeed, postcolonial feminists, frequently drawing on the insights of poststructuralist theory, have been instrumental in mapping the complicities between imperialism, neo-colonialism and the normative discourses of female emancipation embedded in colonial as well as modernist and developmentalist discourse.

The decade following the publication of Edward Said's highly influential book *Orientalism* in 1978 saw an explosion of the kind of "postcolonial" feminist analysis to which I refer. These draw heavily on Said's and Michel Foucault's insights into power and its

relationship to knowledge/discourse.[13] Chandra Mohanty and Aihwa Ong, among others, presented especially powerful critiques of dominant development narratives, noting the modernist teleology of this discourse and its resonances with earlier colonial constructs of gender relations in the "East". They point to the privileging of the white Euro American woman as the continued referent for modern, educated sexually liberated womanhood. Mohanty's focus on the discursive aspects of colonization embedded in the texts she studied highlights the erasure of third world women's individual subjectivity and their representation as undifferentiated victims of culture and poverty. The invocation of a universalizing and essentialist category of woman makes such a move possible. Similarly, in her review of the literature on women and sweatshop labor, Ong notes how women workers may have conceptions of what constitutes justice or of what their futures should hold that are quite distinct from elite/western feminist notions of emancipation and a good life.

These early texts and the numerous works that have followed, especially those with a transnational approach, see gender as a historical construct, as critical to the discursive (re)production of systems of ruling; they do so without submitting to essentialist notions of womanhood. In response, postcolonial feminists have been criticized for giving undue emphasis to the discursive realm at the expense of the material. The reification of difference and the stress on the politics of representation, critics claim, results in the obliteration of actual material processes and political struggles.

13 In 1988, in addition to Gayatri Spivak's classic exposition *Can the Subaltern Speak*? Aihwa Ong and Chandra Mohanty published articles that were to have a lasting impact on feminist knowledge production of "third world women." Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari's pathbreaking collection of essays, *Recasting Women,* published from New Delhi in 1989, marked another milestone.

Moreover, the implicit attack on the humanist project embedded in development strategies appears politically conservative to many observers (Marchand and Parpart 1995, especially chapter 9).

With reference to the negative impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* on feminist studies in the Middle East, Deniz Kandiyoti has charged that 1) social analysis has been devalued in favor of the analysis of representations, 2) binary thinking about East and West has been promoted rather than undermined so that not enough emphasis is paid to the internal heterogeneity of Middle Eastern Societies and 3) too much attention has been deflected away from local institutions and processes that produce forms of hierarchy and subordination based on gender.[14]

One could argue that such critiques are selective, based as they are on a reading of postcolonial feminism as an exclusively discursive intervention. For, a serious postcolonial reading calls for historically informed, culturally specific analyses of the condition of women, one located within the history of modern imperialism and which cautions against the unreflective use of hegemonic epistemological frameworks. Moreover, the concern with colonial discourse analysis in relation to gender has led to a rethinking of the legacies of imperialism in contemporary global politics and economy. The foregrounding of history, as transnational feminist practices insist upon, points to the impossibility of completely separating the discursive from the material aspects of reality, of discussing contemporary gender relations without confronting the specter of Empire in whatever form - colonialism, globalization, structural adjustment or the so-called war on terror.

Postcolonial and transnational feminisms have much to offer on how to assert political and epistemic agency. They have various argued, in different vocabularies, to be sure, that to endorse

14 See Abu-Lughod, 2001.

the homogeneity of the female subject is to endorse erasure. At the same time, they caution us to be cognizant of the relation of power to knowledge. The research of Lata Mani and Gayatri Spivak on sati, Malek Alloula, Leila Ahmed and Homa Hoodfar on the veil, and Christine Walley on female circumcision all enable us to track the relationship between the civilising mission of colonialism and the shifting uses of a modernist discourse on female emancipation *today* (Ahmed 1992; Alloula 1986; Hoodfar 1997; Mani 1989; Spivak 1988; Walley 1997). These works are not all explicitly postcolonial (or feminist in the case of Alloula) in their approach. However, they are all cognizant of the dynamic and non-innocent relations between power and knowledge and the continuing history of empire. By historicizing the way in which social power is exercised through the language of women's rights, these texts enable productive interventions in otherwise polarizing debates on culture and the place of women in tradition. By highlighting the fluidity of the social meanings of categories assumed to be immutable, they point to the possibility of social transformation. Lastly, by tracing the imbrication of gender relations in larger relations of power, they point us away from the so-called feminist impasse — indicating that women's struggles do not necessarily demand a homogeneous female subject. Perhaps it is the selective insights from postcolonial, poststructural and transnational scholarship, rather than wholesale theories and vocabularies that might be of most use to feminist scholars and activists in Bangladesh.

Women's Studies in Bangladesh Where's the Crisis?

Given the histories of complicity between feminism and imperialism, Bangladesh's development status, and its new-found

identity as a 'moderate' Muslim democracy — what kinds of feminist theory and praxis are viable or available? Research on Bangladeshi women is voluminous and constantly expanding. It has come a long way since the early 1970's, when women really were the invisible half of the population. Moreover, the women's movement has had tremendous success in making gender concerns not only visible but also a significant aspect of civil society discourse. This is most evident when we look at media coverage received on issues relating to women. Women today are hypervisible. Topics of study have broadened considerably - ranging from human rights analysis, including the rights of minority women, to intra border trafficking and the gendered experience of aging. The volume and the quality of scholarship attest to the commitment of feminist scholars who have to constantly negotiate what can only be called a challenging academic environment, complete with resource constraints in the form of hard to acquire publications to frequent university shutdowns. However, most research tends to be located within a narrow WID framework, thereby reproducing a depoliticised and ahistorical understanding of women's lives.[15] Moreover, why is it that postcolonial and transnational feminist scholarship, or the work of radical women of color have had almost no impact on women's studies research? The lack of reference to work by Indian feminists is especially striking. This is a curious gap, since this literature could provide critical historical groundwork for future strategizing.

The explanation lies partially in the specific nature of the development regime and the "donor driven contract research" that the system generates. As one observer puts it, "The development machinery, which has come to play such an important part in contemporary Bangladesh, feeds on appraisal and evaluation studies of many kinds, and many Bangladeshi social scientists have become involved in them. They have also become aware of the characteristics of such research: it is rarely long-term, it comes with its own limited and externally generated agenda, and it is less concerned with academic rigour than with results which can be fed quickly into the administration of development projects."[16] Consequently, the range of research is severely limited, and reflects instrumentalist and sanitized views of development.[17] To put it differently, Bangladeshi researchers live and work in an aid-dependent postcolonial state that is marginal to the global economic and political regime. Much of the research agenda is inevitably donor driven, so that knowledge production is constantly circumscribed by externalities. The major paradigms for understanding women's issues in Bangladesh are underwritten and disciplined by the same forces as those that drive most other intellectual ventures in the country. The tendency toward an uncritical acceptance of the premises of development and modernity saturates all practices of knowledge production.

Research on women, and the relatively new discipline of women's studies, reflects this trend. Bangladeshi women today are the object of scrutiny of a legion of development experts, demographers and sociologists, as well as feminist scholars and various other well-meaning groups. The figure of the essential Woman, under the sign of global feminism, continues to dominate the feminist imagination. Feminism in Bangladesh needs a crisis.

Feminist scholarship in Bangladesh frequently sidesteps interrogation of the knowledge-power and inequality nexus. This

15 For an elaboration, see Dina M. Siddiqi *Women in Question: Gender and Labor in Bangladeshi Factories.*

16 Van Schendel and Westergaard 1997:xii.

17 The class character and concerns of feminist intellectuals, among other things, may also be responsible for this absence.

can happen no matter how well intentioned the author may be. Certain questions simply never get asked. It is urgent, then, to ask who sets the intellectual agenda? What kinds of questions are asked and what issues are elided? In whose interests is such knowledge produced and why is there no discussion of class, nationalism or majoritarian politics in feminist texts? Why is it that so few studies of women refer to structural adjustment, globalization, or international labour markets as they affect the everyday lives of women? Why are there so few *feminist* voices that even question the goals of neo-liberal economic policies? Why, for instance, is there so little discussion among Bangladeshi feminists of micro credit as the path to women's "empowerment" and fulfillment?

The Way Forward?

How can one carve out non-hegemonic intellectual and political spaces from which to speak and produce knowledge about women? Forging alternative interpretive strategies requires, among other things, using a relational and transnational perspective, taking into account history and politics, especially the politics and relations of inequality in both the discursive and material realms. These new intellectual spaces must 1) maintain a critical stance toward the hegemony of Euro-American thought in the canon of global feminist theory, 2) they must critically examine the implications of dominant theories of development and modernization in producing knowledge about Bangladeshi women and 3) they must be able to maintain solidarity with women elsewhere without subscribing to notions of a universal female subjectivity. Turning away from Enlightenment notions of the universal and unified autonomous subject should not be taken as an endorsement of cultural essentialism, which only concedes ground to various right wing agendas.

I am not advocating the adoption of an absolute First World/ Third world Difference and the reinscription of binaries and cultural essentialisms, with scholars engaged in recuperating some kind of 'authentic' indigenous worldview. In any case, the entanglements of our mutual histories — to paraphrase the Indian anthropologist Mary John — make that an impossible enterprise (John 1996). Nor should this be taken as call to a politics of blame. Nevertheless, the hypervisibility of the Muslim woman's body in the Western media since the September 11 bombings reminds us of the political imperatives that frequently inform public desire for "feminist" knowledge about an Other.[18]

In this respect, it's remarkable how often Bangladeshi women are represented as silent, passive victims suffering in the face of a monolithic patriarchy inflected by Islam. Invoked in a flattened and ahistorical manner, the concept of patriarchy simply reproduces orientalist imagery without shedding too much light on

18 The West's fascination with the covered body of the Muslim female Other has not yet subsided. The October 20, 2002 issue of the New York Times magazine carries a striking photograph of two women in Kashmir, India during the recent state elections. A female guard is frisking a female voter as the latter is about to enter the polling booth; both women are veiled. The photograph appears in a section entitled "What They Were Thinking", which covers subject matters that are presumably of topical interest to Times readers. It is not clear if the interviewee was prompted but a large part of what the voter was thinking concerned being searched in public, in front of strange men. Perhaps one should take it as a positive sign that Times readers are now interested in the thoughts of women in faraway places. Incidentally, the front page of the paper on the same day carried a photograph of a borkha-clad woman walking past anti-American graffiti on a doorway in Baghdad. The photo accompanied a story on official Iraqi views of international support for that country. In both instances, it appears that Muslim women's bodies function as ciphers for the cultural and political possibilities of "Muslim society" as a whole.

actual practices.[19] Yet we know that patriarchal practices, along with other social institutions are constantly reconfigured by global capitalism (Siddiqi 1991 and 2000). The easy reference to a timeless and non-modern patriarchy provides yet another example of the dangers of studying women/gender relations in isolation from history and politics.[20]

It is equally imperative to ask who defines what constitutes female emancipation or a given woman's interests. In Western capitalist democracies entry into the paid labor force, into the public sphere of men, has historically been considered the indispensable route to freedom.[21] However, a positive relationship between

19 Shelley Feldman has recently tracked the ways patriarchy has been used in studies of Bangladeshi women. See Feldman 2001

20 The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written forcefully against postmodern tendencies in policy-making matters, especially with respect to gender rights. As it happens, she has also drawn on the experience of development workers in literacy projects in Bangladesh in her condemnation of extreme anti-essentialism. Nussbaum contends that much of the criticism of essentialism leads to a position "where extreme relativism is taken to be the recipe for social progress (Nussbaum1992: 205, cited in Udayagiri: 170)." She argues that essentialism and local contextual understandings are not in opposition to each other but must be combined if there is to be meaningful change. In her project of defining a common humanity, Nussbaum has compiled a list of human capabilities and functions which are general but which can accommodate specificities (Nussbaum 1995). Despite the attack on anti-essentialist/multicultural thinking, Nussbaum's position complements rather than undermines the arguments of most postcolonial feminists. See, for instance Uma Narayan 2000: 97.

21 Women in post socialist societies that are currently being showered with funds and theories of feminism from Europe and America have a very different experience of the public-private dichotomy. For them, entry into wage labor is not especially appealing since they always been in the public sphere, sometimes through state coercion. (Of course, this holds true for working class and minority women in other places).

women's visibility in the public sphere and their emancipation, for instance, cannot be automatically assumed in the Bangladeshi context. In the course of research on the sexual harassment of women factory workers in the last few months, I was struck by the comments workers made about the possible solutions to their work-related problems. During a discussion on what the government could do for them, one woman immediately came out with "Get the government to get men to work." Another chimed in disparagingly, "We've heard of men who tell their wives they'd be happy to take care of the household and children, as long as the women go out to work and bring home an income. What kind of a man is that!" Such sentiments force a reconsideration of the relationship between visibility, paid work and women's emancipation or social fulfillment - a trajectory taken for granted in a liberal framework of understanding. Entry into the public sphere as paid factory labor constituted an assault on the self-worth of many of the women to whom I spoke.[22] The prospect of a husband "sitting at home" while their wives were at work was incommensurable with these women's sense of dignity and social expectations. I had heard similar statements many years ago while carrying out dissertation research on garment workers. As a graduate student I was deeply disturbed at such "false consciousness" or attachment to the so-called feminine mystique of eating the *bhatar's* or breadwinner's food. In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand why the prospect of staying at home was so much more appealing compared to working under grueling conditions for 12 hours a day, six days a

Rather, a primary concern for women in Eastern Europe, especially in the Balkans, is the way nationalist and patriarchal forces have colluded to discipline their lives.

22 Obviously not all women feel this way. Responses vary according to age and family responsibility. The desire to retreat into the private sphere is typical of older once-married women with children.

week, and risking respectability for a minimal cash income.[23]

My point is that a Liberal framework, with its uncritical valorization of the "free" modern subject, cannot capture such cultural complexities. Scholarship that does not take into account the disciplinary production of subjects that capitalist modernity entails risks reproducing cultural essentialisms. Feminist scholars who condemn religious "fundamentalism" and its hold over women's bodies, while valorizing the "free" modern/western female subject reproduce cultural and imperial hegemony in the name of feminism (Sayyid 1997: 10). A liberal framework cannot accept the possibility that desire itself may be structured differently, that as individuals and as members of specific communities, products of specific histories, different women may have very different understandings of the world from what we consider to be desirable (Ong; Abu-Lughod).

Moving away from constructions of third world women as passive objects of study requires developing an intellectual and political space from which to speak, without merely reversing the colonial gaze, or the self-other hierarchy. This should not be taken to mean the erasure of the discursive and historical links between regions and between individuals and communities in those regions. Rather, such a project calls for acknowledging the entanglements of history, in pursuit of relational analyses and transnational connections that link women together. A transnational and relational

23 My intention is not to valorize the authenticity of individual women's "voices," or claim women can be heard unmediated and without recourse to ideological frameworks of understanding. Gayatri Spivak (1988) has been foremost among feminist scholars in cautioning us against such naive pathways to the "truth" of women's subjectivity. My point is somewhat different, as I hope is apparent. For an interesting critique of anthropology and the politics of listening, see Lynne Phillips 1996.

approach also allows for the construction of multiple genealogies of feminism, and the possible interconnections among the different strands of feminist thought at any point in time (Alexander and Mohanty 1997).

That is, a global and transnational perspective is necessary for the creation of an emancipatory feminist epistemology. Here I take the work of Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty as my reference point. Transnational feminism cannot be an internationalism that regards differences among women in an abstract sense. Nor can it assume that patriarchy means that same thing for all women. Mohanty suggests addressing the concrete social and political processes that cross national borders and effect a complex of hierarchical relations among and within historically specific communities. She reminds us that global relations of labor, property and state control profoundly affect women's daily choices and concerns.

Conclusion

Knowledge about "women" in Bangladesh occupies a fraught position in the national imaginary. Arguably, women's status stands in for the postcolonial nation's proximity to or distance from modernity and civility. In crucial ways, the stage was set much earlier, with the perceived need to "reform" women's lives in order to move the nation-in-process closer to civilization and the modern world. Such a move required identifying women with the not-modern and backward — that is, with culture, tradition, religion and authenticity.

Globally, we're at a critical juncture - caught between powerful right wing movements and the practices of capitalism unbound, so to speak. The situation has given a new lease of life to false oppositions between East/West, Tradition/Modernity, Religious/

Secular. Culture and religion have become especially dangerous weapons in post-colonial nation-states like Bangladesh (See Siddiqi 98). Understanding how "the woman question" is constructed and appropriated in this context is critical for any serious feminist intervention.

Feminist scholars must negotiate the conflicts and tensions inherent in the contemporary transnational moment. How do we refuse relativism and confront power, without acceding to universalism? How do we move beyond the complicities of global feminism with the agendas of capitalist modernity as we produce feminist knowledge? We might start by focusing on "the significance of global capitalism to gendered formations and by prioritizing political economy when producing knowledge about sex and gender internationally (Joseph, Ramamurthy and Weinbaum 2001: 1)." Critical to this transnational project is an understanding of the ways in which political economy and cultural politics converge to shape women's everyday realities. Such an understanding is akin to what Gayatri Spivak calls transnational literacy (Spivak 1999, Chapter 4). Such transnational literacy requires historicizing the discursive as well as material practices of global capitalism.

The challenge at this juncture is how best to incorporate the insights of textual/discursive analyses without jettisoning an analysis of the material conditions of women's lives. Unmasking the power relations hidden by the invocation of a universal female subject often requires the simultaneous interrogation of colonialism and capitalism. If we are to understand the material realities of women's worlds today, we need to conceptualize women in their specific and often contradictory encounters with colonialism, contradictions that continue to shape the dynamics of transnationalism and globalization.[24]

24 See Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds.) *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Introduction.

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