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Post-Colonial Feminism and Multiculturalism: Traversing the Myth of Apparent Dichotomy

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ABSTRACT

The prima facie debate between feminism and multiculturalism breeds on portraying cultural victimization of minority women. This digressive conclusion works on a premise of subjugation that is culture-centered. The cradle for affixation of this post colonial theory lies in legacy of colonialism, which sees third world cultures as more subjugation prone as compared to Western cultures, in the vocalization of liberalism, in the ubiquitous depictions of feminism, and in the overall certain-culture specific construed inception of minority group subordination. Positing and overemphasis on the multiculturalism- feminism dichotomy blurs the real questions of women's role in a patriarchal society and the forces deployed in moulding the cultural practices. It also over sensitizes the practise of this minority subjugation as a practise of the third world, thereby watering down ambit of violence in the West. Thus, addressing these questions needs a cavernous discourse which traverses beyond this apparent dichotomy mentioned above. Thus, sexism is as much prevalent in the Western communities as in the minority cultures and the false paradigm of victimization further intensifies the irony that the victimization does not lie in culture rather it lies in the non- acceptance as equals within their own culture and this holds for not only the women in the minority communities and third World nations, but also for women from the so called progressive societies..

Keywords: *Feminism, colonisation, multi-culturalism.*

As per Okin, the contemporary presumptive discourse which propositis a shift from minority assimilation to *umwandlung*², posits an apparent discordance concerning the future of minority claims vis a vis gender equality. For instance the instance of female foeticide amongst the African minorities in developed states, such as France and United States, or the practise of child marriage amongst the Iraqi immigrants or the instances in Middle Eastern nations of punishing the servile behaviour or adultery of the wife with murder³. This for Okin implies that a liberal culture of the West, even though having a patriarchal cradle, reinforces greater liberty for women, emanating from either almost extinct minority culture or from an assimilated

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² Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Pg 7-10

³ *Ibid* at 18

gender equitable minority culture⁴. While each culture has certain drawbacks of its own, vocalizing multiculturalism as always striking a discordance with feminism, posits certain fundamental flaws. It's not the cultural relativism but the liberty of normative choices, which mirrors these fundamental flaws.

The proposition that Western liberal cultures are more assimilating and thereby less patriarchal, creates the core dichotomy between post-colonial feminism and multiculturalism. This proposition gleams of the perception that women from minority communities in the Western nations are victims of a sexist and aberrant violence, and that their situation mirror reflects those of women in the third world nations⁵. This biased perception vocalizes violence as a common place occurrence amongst the Third World communities and minority immigrants as opposed to illustrating outbursts of violence as exceptional events in the Western nations⁶. Interestingly, violent outbursts against women find a direct cultural connection for the Third world nations or the minority immigrant communities, while the mainstream liberal nations shy away from these correlations. For instance, instead of analyzing dowry murder (prevalent in South Asian Nations, mostly India) alongside domestic violence murders in the Western Countries, a cultural analogy is illustrated between the dowry death in the South Asian communities and divorce in the United States, although, the numerical difference in these two deaths is not huge⁷. Thus, the cultural correlation in the Third World nations is meant to suggest that there is a common presumption held about "death by culture"⁸ in the Third World Nations. For instance, the tragic murder of Aleymma Mathew in Texas, by her husband by burning, was mis-construed as a practise of sati and the media portrayed her death as an exemplification of "death by culture"⁹. Infact the Dallas Observer sketched the lady's death as an outcome of her refusal to give in to the cultural subjugation which the women from the Third World nations, particularly, India, go through¹⁰. Ironically, the woman, though of an Indian origin, belonged to the christian community. The article is just a small but a very significant illustration of the dilemma that cultural affixation of death with respect to minority women causes. At the same time, this narrative expounds the Third World nations associated "King Kong Syndrome", as demonstrated by Rey Chow. This "is the cross- cultural syndrome in which 'Third World', as

⁴ Ibid at 22-23

⁵ See Karin Mickelson, *Rhetoric and Rage: Third World Voices in International Legal Discourse*, 16 *Wis. Int'l L.J.* 353, 355-62 (1998)

⁶ Lama Abu-Odeh, *Comparatively Speaking: The "Honour" of the "East" and the "Passion" of the "West"*, 1997 *Utah L. Rev.* 287, 290

⁷ See Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* 99 (1997)

⁸ Ibid 84

⁹ *Varughese v State*, 892 S.W.2d 186, 189, 193 (Tex App. 1994)

¹⁰ Radhika Parameswaram, *Coverage of "Bride Burning" in Dallas Observer*,

the site of the ‘raw’ material that is ‘monstrosity’, is produced for the surplus- value of spectacle, entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the ‘First World’¹¹. This sheds light on the classic example of pre-concluding burning of women in the third world nations as a facet of cultural exoticism, but the premise for such conclusion fails to appreciate that burning in these nations is no more exotic than shooting in the Western countries¹².

The cultural affixation to behavioral patterns with regards to women of minority community and Third World Nations, as opposed to women of Western Cultures, causes the apparent dichotomy between feminism and multiculturalism. Thus, while a scarf resonates with fashion for a White woman, even if she wears it as a veil, the same scarf is ipso facto considered a veil even if an Iranian woman wears it in fashion¹³. The culture induced behavioral affixation discussed above presumes that this cultural relativism breeds in sexist and static paradigm in these communities. This static paradigm is supposed to be submissive and orthodox while only the West is presumed to adorn a rational character. The paradigm creates a faulty notion of herd choice making in the Third World Nations and minority communities, while an individualistic rational choice making ability is apparently a cloak of the West. This reflects a narrow understanding of the term “culture”. The terms various based on several facets of region, age, sexual orientation, among others. Breaking the myth of water-tight compartmentalization of the boundaries of “culture”, not only recognizes the breathing space for feminism within minority communities, but also broadens the possibilities of gender-subordination within Western cultures.

The hybrid nature of a culture distinguishes it from a cult, but the commonplace practise of using cultural identity to justify certain actions, both within and outside a particular community, hazes this distinction. The instance of woman being burnt to death, as discussed above, is a vivid illustration of this irony. The static and misogynistic conceptions of cultural practices in the non-western communities allows the behavioral issues of criminal defendant to get proffered by media as an outcome of his cultural identity¹⁴.

The historical grounds of colonization, feminist depictions, binary logics, are amongst the many intellectual genealogies that presume subordination of women in the minority cultures.

¹¹ Rey Chow, *Violence in the Other Country: China as Crisis, Spectacle, and Woman*, in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*

¹² Narayan, *Supra Note 6*, at 101-102

¹³ Homa Hoodfar, *The Veil In their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women*, in *The Politics of Culture and in the Shadows of Capitalism* 248, 270 (Lisa Lowe & David Lloyd eds., 1997)

¹⁴ Kristin Koptiuch, “Cultural Defense” and Criminological Displacements: Gender, Race and (Trans) Nation in the Legal Surveillance of U.S. Diaspora Asians, in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* 215, 223 (Smadar Lavie & Ted Swedenburg eds., 1996)

For instance, Oriental's dichotomy between "traditional" East and "modern" West was binarily juxtaposited in a theoretical colonial premise which perceived East as orthodox and barbaric. On the contrary, West was considered as civilized and democratic¹⁵. Modernity was seen to have a positive correlation with treatment of women, for instance, the veil and Islamic treatment of women was the colonial weapon used in Egypt to justify barbaric treatment of women in those British colonies¹⁶. Contrastingly, the British feminism movement used the "victimized sisters" portrayal of India to exemplify the torments they did not desire to go through¹⁷. The background of drawing this parallel failed to appreciate the differences between the paradigms in which the women were placed, including physical and socio-economic freedom the women in the West enjoyed, unlike in India. The strong correlation between nationalistic ideals and women, existed for every anti-colonial struggle which stared at cultural and traditional strengthening from the point of liberating and emancipating its women¹⁸.

The fundamental flaw in judging cultural progress via the cross-sectional study of relative status of women across nations, lies in the assumption that visions Western women as a product of liberated, secular mindset while seeing the women in minority and third world nations as puppets of extreme patriarchal subjugation. This material testimony of liberation for Western women I the product of their digressive self representation where emancipation is seen void of the ground struggles taking place in these third world nations¹⁹. These presumptions run on a notion of a unitary female subject which fails to appreciate gender as a "highly contingent and diverse formation"²⁰ and hence the unitary construction which confines women from becoming part of other facets of the society, further deepens the diversion between feminism and multiculturalism²¹. The unitary construction of female status, further, battles against universal problems facing women, which interestingly receive a diverse treatment. For Instance, even though rape or sexual violence, is a problem faced by women across nations, yet even within United Nations this issue receives a differential treatment based on immigration and racial grounds.

Another important reason seeing minority women as victims of their culture lies in liberalism. A local or general subject in the context of liberalism stands apart from the abstract notion²².

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* 104 (1978)

¹⁶ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* 152-53 (1992)

¹⁷ Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and Culture of the Travel* 11 (1996)

¹⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Post Colonial Histories* 116-57 (1993)

¹⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses in Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* 51 (Chandra T. Mohanty eds., 1991)

²⁰ Grewal, *Women's Rights*, supra no.16, at 342

²¹ Inderpal Grewal, *On New Global Feminism*, 519-20 (1990)

²² Austin Sarat & Roger Berkowitz, *Disorderly Differences: Recognition, Accomodation and American Law*, 6

The abstract notion of colonial people as “archaic primitives” set them apart from the rest in the historical travel. The disproportionate burden-sharing is presumed to come on the shoulder of other subjects of liberalism, while the third world and minority nations stand at the edge of trans-national sisterhood outcry.

Also, the binary logic encompassing the dichotomy between multiculturalism and feminism, perceives the boundaries of gender and race as “mutually exclusive”. Such narrowly defined boundaries indicate women’s liberation to be associated with withering away of their culture. The premise of binary logic is again flawed as its core firstly, sees women of color as being a victim of gender inequality and subordination in all scenarios and secondly, creates artificial exclusive compartments of “gender” and “race”, which are rather mutually constitutive. Feminism also vocalizes a rights-based society and hence the debate of feminism versus multiculturalism sees women of color as belonging to a culture which is void of human rights, while the Western society continues to be judged on the epitome of a liberal pedestal. Thus, while multiculturalism is presumed to shun women rights, feminism embarks upon a path where the rights of minority culture hold no ground. When the basis for construing differences between Women from western and non western nations is flawed, our construction of cultures and the paradigm for its respective progress gets severely flawed. Parallel to the problem with binary logic runs the sameness or difference debate that feminist theories adopt²³. The impossible choice that this debate traverses upon is whether a “male” should be like us or different from us.²⁴ It boils down to demanding a status of women either *pari materia* with that of a man, or choosing an alternative discourse. Such a binary construction provides a positive value to the first term while subjugating the second notion. The alternatives to overcoming such subordination lie in either re-negotiating the values of the second notion, for instance, revaluing the significant non-monetary contributions of women ever since ancient times, or a solution can be worked out by putting the second notion at the heart of the first one.

Centering the Society’s debate on feminisms versus multiculturalism around cultural practices and ideologies sadly obscures the intensity of focus on the actual detrimental effects. The *ex situ* forces working outside the individual communities and resulting in plight of women in these communities stay hidden. For instance, global inequalities, racial and colonial histories, the changing contours of patriarchy in a specific context, the draining of transnational wealth, and other heterogeneous forces that *ex-situ* mould a culture, run the risk of being ignored when only

Yale J.L. & Human 285, 310 (1994)

²³ Joan W. Scott, *Deconstructing Equality- Versus- Difference, Or The Use of Post Structural theory of Feminism*, 14 *Feminist Stud*, 33,43 (1988)

²⁴ *UAW v Johnson Controls, Inc.*, 499 U.S. 187, 190 (1991)

the in-situ forces are too much in the limelight. Even the discourses of sati glorify it as extremes of barbaric practise which is often defined on social and financial grounds, without giving due credit to the religious or devotional aspect of it. Similarly the strong correlation between the strengthening of religious fundamentalism and the rise of geopolitical economics gets overlooked while defining the concerns for gender apartheid under the taliban forces²⁵.

Over emphasis on sexist practices affixed to culture undermines the other deeper problems affecting such women. Only the issues of Sati, femake infanticide, child marriage footbinding, garner attention, while the other and much deeper issues of economic inequity, transnational draining of wealth, exploitation, racism, are often overlooked. In a book named “Warrior Marks²⁶”, the response of women to “female genital mutilation” was :

“...ask the “rich Americans” for a refrigerated truck they need badly to get their produce to outlying areas. The filmmakers, who do not perceive themselves as “rich” by their own cultural standards, joke that they could probably only pay for one tire for such truck. The request for a truck is not mentioned again...”²⁷

When such women are placed at periphery of the outcry for globalization, which outreaches for women’s liberation, then these women are denied the benefits of being core beneficiaries of such emancipation. Lastly, labelling Third World cultural practices as barbaric, anarchic and sexist at their roots overlooks the indigenous sexism pertinent in the Western nations. The United States aided Mujahideen forces, were the cradle for rise of Taliban. The brutal hudood ordinance in Pakistan was the contribution of United States aided General Zia, that provided barbaric punishment for instances of adultery²⁸. Feminism in the West that outcries oppression based purely on patriarchy in the non western nations needs to analyze these scenarios thoroughly.

Thus, the highlighted ordeals of women in the minority cultures are the ones that the West is able to easily identify. The concerns on limitation of freedom of movement, bodily integrity, right to shelter, concerns for one’s sexuality or basic sustenance are the concerns for self-conceptualised fears which ironically are highlighted at greater pedestal. Women are capable of self-emancipatory changes and labelling them as victims of their own culture fails to perceive this vital role of women. Infact, what is more ironical is that not only do the Muslim

²⁵ William Blum, A Brief History of United States Intervention, 1945 to the Present, (2001)

²⁶ Alice Walker & Pratibha Parmar, Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women 253 (1993)

²⁷ Inderpal Grewal & Caren Kaplan, Warrior Marks: Global Womanism’s Neo-Colonial Discourse in a Multicultural Context, 39 Camera Obscura 5,7 (1996)

²⁸ Micheal F.Polk, Women Prosecuted under Islamic Law: The Zina Ordinance in Pakistan as Basis for Asylum claims in the United States, 12 Geo. Immigr. L.J. 379, 380 (1998)

nations preserve reservations in their grundnorms or the constitution when it comes to the “sacred laws”, the same holds for the United States. A parallel analogy can be drawn in the reservations made to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the United States by placing racial discrimination at a higher pedestal than the sexual discrimination shies away from its international obligation.

Thus, sexism is as much prevalent in the Western communities as in the minority cultures and the false paradigm of victimization further intensifies the irony that the victimization does not lie in culture rather it lies in the non- acceptance as equals within their own culture and this holds for not only the women in the minority communities and third World nations, but also for women from the so called progressive societies.
