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Coloniality and women: Examining the claims of postcolonial feminism in the present context, with special reference to India

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Abstract

When feminism as a movement started in the early 20th century in the Western world with its genesis in the revolution of attainment of suffrage, political rights and representation, it included within itself the aspirations of Western white female population. Soon, the movement was accompanied by Black women activists like Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, *et al* who took no qualms in raising voice against the systematic institutional racism and sexism against the women of colour, especially in USA. Still for a long time, it was nevertheless largely closed within that circle. Mohanty rightly says that the mainstream feminism homogenised the identity of the third world women and ignored the specific situatedness of the non-first world countries. But I seek to go far as I can, to say that the feminism whether in movement or as a propositional discourse never had the third world women as its target of interest.

But coming to the present time, with the passage of seven decades since eradication of colonial rule and a rule of capitalist globalisation, a question arises to the significance of postcolonial Feminist thought. Is it still relevant today? How far have been the postcolonial Feminist discourse been able to contribute to the interest of third world female population? Do such Feminists of Global South been successful in generating an own ubiquitous array of linguistic frameworks in the background of particularity of the third world women? In this paper, with my present limited understanding, I would seek to engage with these questions and provide answers.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism, political rights, capitalist globalisation

Introduction

Postcolonial Feminist discourse and imperialism

Postcolonial Feminist discourse has this implicit propensity to make colonial past of a nation a de facto functional hypothesis for majority of predicaments the third world women face in this contemporary era. This is symptomatic, possibly on some sense but not entirely, of dodging the responsibility on the part of third world nations.

Even if the colonial past of a nation, as a cause of present misogynist attitude is to be emphasised over and over again, a fact shouldn't ignored that we now are situated in the era of highest economic exchange since the history of mankind. The variables are constantly changing. The bond between coloniality and the third world feminist issues doesn't hold much force now. In the era of neo globalised world, the powerplay has got more dynamic. The simple reason is that the agencies in possession of hegemonic soft power, are shifting from White Western World to Countries like China and Japan. The postcolonial adage is losing its depth with the generation of this new complicated powerplay, where Indian interest is holding a much powerful influence, which was all in the past, a single monopoly of the Western World.

Even in the line of present feminist discourses, not only the centrality of Black and Latina women experiences is surfacing but Asian-centric feminist discourse has never been full-fledged. The soft power of countries like of China, Japan and Korea are indeed a key factor in exemplifying the new age value generation. The orientation to native and non-white women have never been higher in the literature and cinematic backgrounds.

Indeed, there had been tantamount effects of colonisation blatantly visible after the long decades to come since the British and other Western colonisers subsided. It had overwhelming effect on the overall well-being of women. The effects of colonization were explicit and manifested in the worst of worst socio-economic parameters. The disaster was visible nearly in all the post colonized and neo-colonized third world countries.

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The third world actually became the third world thanks to the brutal imperialism from White invaders.

Apart from socio-economic status quo, in respect to Indian subcontinent, the terms of gender and sexual identity injustice that pervaded long in postcolonial political arena was a product of value system of colonisers. Rejection of Trans identity, putting homosexuality under penalty code was such an instance.

Capitalism and Coloniality

Postcolonial Feminist writers often display anti-capitalist sentiments. For instance, this excerpt from Mohanty:

“I believe feminist solidarity as defined here constitutes the most principled way to cross borders- to decolonize knowledge and practice anti-capitalist critique”^[1].

The Capitalist encounters, especially with the African nations have never been healthy. The ecological damage and insult to integrity of African netizens was all known. These instances are abuse of power which was done by the First World countries, already in the possession of capital from hosting the imperial countries for such long periods. But totalising affinity between the coloniality and capitalism cannot be established as postcolonial and postcolonial Feminist thinkers have sought to do. What colonial power actually did was to provide a causal impetus to capitalism, the former had a causal relation to the latter. Capitalism shouldn't be equated and identified with the coloniality. It's a mistake to make an identical relation between them. There can be capitalist forces constituted with the narrow nationalism aspirations without having a colonial past. This is clearly instantiated in the case of China.

Moreover, capitalism does not only stand for a value system it is supposed to hold as critics have contributed to it but it should be understood that capitalism is, by so far, a working economic model.

Success of postcolonial Feminist discourse in recognition of situatedness of the third world women

One critique of post colonialism in general is given by Vivek Chibber in which he posits that postcolonial thought isn't successful in highlighting and distinguishing the particularities of the third world in general, because “it has no theory of a general, it does not understand the particularly since it exoticizes them and reifies them”. I think this critique embodies the postcolonial feminism also.

For example, take this excerpt from Talpade's feminist postcolonial work 'Contesting Cultures' –

“Feminists all over the world need to be suspicious of locally prevalent pictures of "national identity" and "national traditions;" both because they are used to privilege the views and values of certain parts of the heterogeneous national population, and because they are almost invariably detrimental to the interests and political standing of those who are relatively powerless within the national community ”^[2].

This paragraph which calls for a universalised apprehension for national identity is ironically followed by her exemplification of American national identity, in total rejection of particularity of the third-world's ideas of national identity.

“Ongoing versions of U.S. nationalism continue to function

to marginalize a great many members of its national community, even as American nationalism continues to be deployed to justify problematic economic and political interventions in other parts of the world. And, as the visible presence of many Christian groups on the right wing of the American”^[3].

The status of national identity of USA is repeatedly evoked by many postcolonial feminist thinkers to present a simulating condition in the third world. But there might be a stark difference when it would come to the idea of national identity for an African nation or India or any other Asian country. Not only is this an exemplification of total disregard of particularity of national identity for the third world, as to borrow this idea from Prof Chibber, it's in total disregard to the postcolonial Feminist project.

Postcolonial feminist thinkers have never been in the road to construct their own situated feminist configuration. Merely highlighting the first world women's exchange of matter which was established in their own theme would not do any constructive development to the third world women discourse. There should be more to the story than unthreading the mainstream feminist interests of matter. The mainstream feminist has inculcated an evolving consciousness throughout the generations. There had been a transformation of dialogic paradigm in society through the feminism, but there seems to be no remarkable effects of postcolonial on the political or social geist of the third world countries. In fact, postcolonial feminist writers, as far as I have observed have not done away with stereotypical linguistic apparatus for the Eastern culture which the West employs.

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¹ Feminism Without Borders, C.T Mohanty

² Uma Narayan's Dislocating Cultures

³ Ibid.