DIS/UNITED COLOURS OF FEMINISM

Jarmila Drozdíková
Záhrebská 6, 811 05 Bratislava, Slovakia

From among the divisions that in the last decades of the twentieth century beset the theoretical field of feminism, the split between white feminism and black (Afro-American) feminism, and concurrently, between the political and cultural positions of Euro-American, First World women and those of Third World women of colour seems the most divisive.

Feminism must be seen above all as a social and political force the aim of which is to change the existing power relations between men and women. As a movement for social change, feminism's theoretical developments have been closely bound up with the struggle for political changes.Thus, for feminism, politics and theory are mutually dependent. Besides operating through campaigns for social and economic changes, feminism was productive in the spheres of culture and knowledge. Feminist theorists from Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) onwards have recognized as a primary source of the oppression of women the cultural construction of femininity which makes women 'insignificant objects of desire' and opposes the category 'woman' to the category of 'human'. Annette Kuhn stresses in *The Power of Image* (1985), 'From its beginnings, feminism has regarded ideas, language and images as crucial in shaping women's and men's lives.'

Historically feminism's initial project tied theoretical analysis of oppression to a narrative of emancipation through social transformation. Its aim was women's *equality* through their admission to the spheres from which they had been excluded, including the spheres of rational thought. It was assumed that dominant theoretical discourses could be expanded, even transformed through women's inclusion. Much feminist theory of the 1960s and early 1970s set out to transform these existing theoretical models. In the process it became evident, however, that women's exclusion was not an omission, but a fundamental structuring principle of all patriarchal discourses. It was Simone de Beauvoir who in *The Second Sex* (1949) showed that woman in Western thought has represented the Other that confirms man's identity as Self, as a rational thinking being. The Self can only be defined in opposition to something which is not-self. Man, ac-

cording to Beauvoir, has assigned to himself the category of Self, and constructed woman as Other.

Besides, women could be included within Western discourses only in terms of *sameness,* not difference, within frameworks which could discuss women only in terms of a common, male-referenced humanity. As *subjects* of these discourses, as thinkers or writers, women could occupy only pre-given positions, those of surrogate men. Following this line of thinking feminist analysts arrived at the conclusion that the subject of modernism was not a universal human being, but a Western, bourgeois, white, heterosexual man (Thornham 1999: 43). Thus a universal woman had also to be excluded as subject/object of feminist thinking, since she would be as conditioned as her male counterpart: a Western, bourgeois, white heterosexual woman.

The implications are far-reaching. Feminist theory cannot claim both that knowledge and self are historically and culturally constituted and that feminist theory can speak for a universal 'woman'. Feminism has to embrace differences between women and admit that the knowledge it can possess is partial. Having undertaken this step, it seems to move away from its Enlightenment beginnings and throw in its lot with postmodernism.[1] Like postmodernism, feminism expresses scepticism as regards universal claims about such issues as nature, reason, progress, science etc. In agreement with postmodernism, feminism argues that Western representations are the product of access not to truth but to power. Both present a critique of binarism, thinking by means of oppositions, in which one term must always be devalued. However, "(feminism's) political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose identity and experiences . . . are necessarily different from those of men. If . . . we remove gender (or sexual difference) as a central organizing principle - how can a feminist political practice any longer be possible?" (ibid. 44, 45). If feminism accepts, in tune with postmodern thinking, the end of metanarratives of emancipation, and that at a time when women's emancipation is far from being complete, the result will be feminism's own eradication.

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[1] In the debates with postmodernism, where the contribution of feminism is acknowledged as an important factor in the destabilizing of modernism's concept of universal 'subject', feminism is also being remarginalized. Feminist objections are expressed by Nancy Hartsock. 'Why is it,' she asks, 'that just at the moment when many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?' (Nicholson 1990). She believes it is no accident that just at the time when those who have been excluded begin to theorize and demand political change, doubts are expressed about whether the world can be theorized and whether progress is possible. In Hartsock's opinion the intellectual moves of postmodernism constitute merely the latest accent of the voice of the 'master discourse' in an attempt to deal with the social challenges and theoretical challenges of the time (Thornham 1999: 47- 48).

Feminists are understandably divided[2] over these questions as well as over the issues of the social itself (gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality etc.) Feminist theory has developed a series of oppositional stances not only against external context (e.g. legislation, dominant discourses) but also, concurrently, in its own internal self-critical processes (the debates on academic feminism versus activism, women's studies versus feminist cultural theory among others). One major division and a crucial shift in feminist thought was prompted by the writings of women of colour[3] and their critique of racism in the women's movement. The division over the issue of race versus gender and over the importance of each for the definition of women's oppression resulted in opposition between a 'white', Western feminism and a 'US Third World feminism'. The criticism articulated by the women of colour addressed more directly white feminists than (white) patriarchal power structures. In spite of concerted efforts to overcome the division, the results were unsatisfactory and inadequate (Lauretis 1993: 317). The oppositions within the feminist household remain present and active both in women's struggles and in feminist consciousness.

Numerous essays by and about Third World women have been published in the West covering a wide range of issues. Some of these texts written by feminist sociologists, anthropologists and journalists etc. have been received with criticism on the part of the feminist authors from the Third World. This criticism must be seen in the context of the broader critique of Orientalism initiated by Edward Said's path-breaking work. Thus the book of the well-known French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva *About Chinese Women* (1977) came in for the most detailed criticism having aroused particular antagonism on the part of Gayatri Spivak, a prominent American literary critic of Indian origin. For Spivak, Kristeva's work is a perfect example of the manner in which the involvement of First World intellectuals in the Third World functions as a process of *self*-constitution. Kristeva's reliance on systems of binary oppositions between the Ori-

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[2] Some feminists (Sabina Lovibond) insist that feminism must not be seduced by the attractions of postmodernism in order not to lose the ability of political action. Others (Jane Flex, Nancy Fraser, Linda Nicholson) argue that feminist theories, 'like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interprete ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be' (Nicholson 1990).

[3] The positions of African-American women are not the same as those of other women of colour; each condition of oppression requires specific analysis that refuses the separations but insists on the non-identities of race, sex, and class. These matters make starkly clear why an adequate feminist theory of gender must *simultaneously* be a theory of racial difference in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction. They also make clear why a theory and practice of sisterhood cannot be grounded in shared positionings in a system of sexual difference and the cross-cultural structural antagonism between coherent categories called women and men. Finally, they make clear why feminist theory produced by women of colour has constructed alternative discourses of womanhood that disrupt the humanisms of many Western discursive traditions (Haraway 1997: 38).

ent and the 'Indo-European world' leads Kristeva to reinforce stereotypes about the unchanging nature of Chinese life and at the same time to ignore the variety of non-Western cultures. Spivak sees Kristeva's work as superficial without adequate regard for archival evidence or research, and her belief that Chinese women, having supposedly preserved pre-patriarchal forms of power through millenia, were not further marginalized under Maoism, as naive (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 93). As a corrective to Kristeva's deficiencies, Spivak (1987: 135) recommends a fundamentally different approach to the Third World women: "The academic [Western] feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion." That means that Western women must stop feeling priviledged *as a woman* in particular when racial differences come into play. Spivak emphasizes the importance of trying to recognize and hear the Other woman in *her* terms and not simply assimilating her unproblematically to Western values, histories and regimes of knowledge. Although, in general, Spivak is critical of French feminism, she also recognizes some French feminist models as useful, namely 'symptomatic reading' developed by H. Cixous and others, as a means to initiate inquiries involving a critique of essentialistic or biologistic models of woman's identity. In Spivak's view, a 'translation' of Western feminist narratives out of their original context is a necessary condition for their application in the different conditions in the Third World (ibid. 153).

Postcolonial feminist critics recognize the wide range of visions and perspectives offered by Western feminist theorists, but they argue that all these various analytical categories and even strategies have remarkably similar effects as they codify their relationship to the Other in implicitly hierarchical terms.They are convinced that these analytical principles to a great degree distort Western feminist political practices, and limit the possibility of coalitions among Western feminists and working class and feminist women of colour around the world. It is the integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice that determines the significance of Western feminist writings on women in the Third World. As other kinds of scholarship, feminist scholarly practices do not represent only 'objective knowledge', but also a political and discursive practice, insofar as it is ideological. The term 'colonization' has come to be used by some feminist women of colour in the USA to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements. Although this term may be problematic, it implies a relation of domination and suppression of the heterogeneity of the relevant subject and can be used to evaluate the Western feminists' theoretical writings on the Third World women using analytic categories which take as a primary point of reference feminist interests articulated in the West (Mohanty 1994: 196). It is the production of the monolithic Third World woman across geographies and cultures that the postcolonial feminist critics want to reject.

Thus, although Western feminist discourse is far from homogenous in its goals and analyses, its effects show a great degree of coherence resulting from

the implicit assumption of the West as the primary referent. Moreover, in the context of the West's hegemonic position today, Western feminist scholarship must be seen within a particular world balance of power. It cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in today's global economic and political framework. Although the informative value of most Western feminist writing on women in the Third World has to be acknowledged as pathbreaking and absolutely essential, on the other hand it must be reflected in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship, i.e. the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Feminist writing thus has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience.

One such significant effect of the dominant 'representations' of Western feminism is its conflation with imperialism in the eyes of particular Third World women.[4] This shows urgent need for careful examination of the political implications of Western feminist strategies. Answering this need, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial discourse' (In: Williams and Chrisman, eds.: 1994: 196-220), taking feminist scholarship in social sciences as her subject, explores the ways in which white feminism has constructed a monolithic 'Third World woman' as its object of knowledge. She provides a comprehensive commentary on basic analytical presuppositions which are present in Western feminist discourse on women in the Third World, namely "women" as a category of analysis, methological universalisms applied in feminist writings, and the more specifically political presupposition, the model of power.

According to Mohanty, the homogeneity of women as a group, in most feminist writing, is produced not on the basis of biological characteristics, but rather on the grounds of sociological and anthropological universals. Women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. Feminist discourse on women in the Third World constructs 'Third World women' as a homogeneous powerless group, victims of a particular cultural and socio-economic system. They are defined as victims of male violence, victims of the colonial process, of the economic development process, to name just a few instances. In this way, women are primarily defined in terms of their *object status*. In the context of Western feminist writing on the Third World women such objectification has to be criticized (Mohanty 1994: 201). Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (1984:7) argue: "Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional', also portray us as politically imma-

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[4] A number of documents and reports on the UN International Conferences on Women attest to this. Nawal el Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi and Mallica Vajarathon in 'A critical look at the Wellesley conference' (*Quest*, IV, 2, Winter 1978) characterize this conference as 'American-planned and organized', situating Third World participants as passive audiences. They focus especially on the lack of selfconsciousness of Western women's implication in the effects of imperialism and racism in their assumption of 'international sisterhood'.

ture women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism. They need to be continually challenged."

Mohanty's critique does not spare Fran Hosken's 'Female genital mutilation and human rights' (*Feminist Issues* 1981, 1,3) for founding her whole discussion and condemnation of genital mutilation on one privileged premise: the goal of genital mutilation is "to mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of a woman". According to Hosken 'male sexual politics' in Africa and around the world 'share the same political goals: to assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means'. Similar views are expressed in Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) which claims that women in Europe, China and Africa constitute a homogeneous group of victims of male power. (Daly makes problematic comparison between the attitudes towards women witches and healers in the West, Chinese foot binding, and the genital mutilation of women in Africa.) Mohanty believes that this interpretation neglects the specific historical realities which lead to practices like witchhunting and genital mutilation and obliterates differences and complexities of the lives of women of different classes, religions and nations. Male violence, in her view, must be interpreted *within* specific societies.

Another mode of defining the Third World women status is viewing them as perpetually dependent. According to Beverley Lindsay in her book *Comparative Perspectives on Third World Women: The impact of race, sex and class* (1983), dependency relationships based on race, sex and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational and economic institutions. It is shared dependencies that constitute the Third World women as an identifiable group. In order to create a unity of women, the sociological is substituted for the biological. No specifity is accorded to the location of women as subordinate, powerful, marginal or otherwise within particular social and political relations. This strategy assumes men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects before they enter social relations. The crucial point here is that besides being implicated in forming these relations women are also produced by them (Mohanty 1994: 203). As Michelle Rosaldo (1980: 400) stresses, 'woman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions'.

Similarly, in some Western feminist writings on the Third World women, women are assumed to be sexual – political subjects prior to entry into kinship structures. Women as women are not simply *located* within the family. It is in the family, as an effect of kinship structures, that women as women are *constructed,* defined within and by the group (Elizabeth Cowie 'Woman as sign', in: *m / f* 1, 1978: 49-63). Using the patriarchal family, for instance, as the basis of a vision of women that is proper to all Arab and Muslim societies, is misleading. Here all women, regardless of class, ethnic and other differences are seen as being affected by this system in the same way. This interpretation does not take into account such factors as particular power structures or practices within the family, neither does it consider the factor of development.

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Some feminist theorists in the West see religious ideologies as a key to understanding the status of women in the Third World societies. In their cultural analyses of Muslim societies Islam is treated as an ideology separate from social relations and practices rather than a discourse that determines rules for economic and social relations. Marnia Lazreg comments on the reductionism in scholarship on women in the Middle East and North Africa:

"A ritual is established whereby the author appeals to religion as *the* cause of gender inequality just as it is made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory. In an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa mirrors that of theologians' own interpretation of women in Islam...

The overall effects of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being. Because women are subsumed under religion presented in fundamental terms, they are inevitably seen as evolving in nonhistorical time. They have virtually no history. Any analysis of change is therefore foreclosed" (Lazreg 1988: 87).

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity that is cross-cultural is directly connected with the notion that the oppression of women has a singular form, the universal and hegemonic structure of patriarchy or male domination. The notion of universal patriarchy[5] has been criticized for its failure to account for gender oppression in concrete cultural contexts. The focus of Western feminist writing on the position of women as a coherent group regardlesss of class or ethnicity which constructs a binary world where women are always seen in opposition to men, patriarchy always means a male dominance and the religious, legal and economic and familial systems are assumed to have been constructed by men has been opposed by the Third World theorists. They refuse to see women as powerless, unified groups. According to Mohanty (1994: 213) ..."the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political *agency* . . . In other words, Western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group which is placed in kinship, legal and other structures, defines Third World women as subjects *outside* of social relations, instead of looking at the

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[5] The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, an identity existing cross-culturally, comes together with a notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal structure of patriarchy. This form of feminist thinking has been criticized for its attempts to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support Western notions of oppression and because "they tend to construct a "Third World" or even an "Orient" in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism" (Butler 1993: 343). The transformation of the 'oppressed women' in the West into 'the oppressed Third World women' is produced through the paternalistic attitude towards women in the Third World.

way women are constituted as women *through* these very structures. Legal, economic, religious and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards.It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play."

Not all postcolonial feminists, however, agree with Mohanty. In her essay 'Woman skin deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial condition', Sara Suleri accuses Mohanty's paradigmatic essay of binarism: "Mohanty argues that 'Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counterhistory. Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status." A very literal ethic underlies such a dichotomy, one that demands attention to its very obviousness: how is this objectivism to be avoided? How will the ethnic voice of womanhood counteract the cultural articulation that Mohanty too easily dubs as the exegesis of Western feminism? The claim to authenticity – only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequatly represent the lived experience of that culture – points to the great difficulty posited by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want" (Suleri 1992: 760).

Suleri is highly suspicious of the term 'postcolonial Woman' that can represent perspectives as divergent as the African-American or the postcolonial cultural location, and whose imbrications of race and gender are accorded an uncontested iconicity and 'political untouchability'. The coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman,* in Suleri's view, underlies unthinking celebrations of oppression through which the racially female voice becomes a metaphor for "the good" (ibid. 758).

How vague both terms, *postcolonial* as well as *Third World* are, can be seen from a quotation from the work *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* written by bell hooks (sic), an American black feminist. The quotation presents her rather astonishing reading of competing feminisms within the context of racial experience, establishing a hierarchy of colour that segregates different racial perspectives:

"The current popularity of post-colonial discourse that implicates solely the West often obscures the colonizing relationship of the East in relation to Africa and other parts of the Third World. We often forget that many Third World nationals bring to this country the same kind of contempt and disrespect for blackness that is most frequently associated with white Western imperialism ... Within feminist movements Third World nationals often assume the role of mediator or interpreter, explaining the "bad" black people to their white colleagues or helping the "naive" black people to understand whiteness ... Unwittingly assuming the role of go-between, of mediator, she re-inscribes a colonial paradigm" (ibid. 764).

Commenting on this quotation Suleri regrets the fact that rather than extending the inquiry into the problems represented by the intersection of gender and race, feminist intellectuals like hooks misuse their status as minority voices to enact the strategies of divisive belligerence.

The oppression of women in the context of Islam deserves special attention, as both Islamic teaching and practices in relation to women are seen as extremely repressive, especially in popular understanding in the West. Polygamy, women's seclusion and mandatory veiling have become primary targets of criticism.

Historically, these practices, mainly veiling of women in Muslim societies, acquired multiple 'symbolic' meaning when Western colonial establishments, although themselves patriarchal, began to attack these traditions as primary reason for the Muslim backwardness and obstacles for the progress to civilisation. Western missionaries and feminists further strengthened this imperialist formula, which resulted in a fusion of Muslim women's issues with Islamic culture as a whole (Stowasser 1994: 128).

In Leila Ahmed's view (1992: 129) "...those who proposed an improvement in the status of women in Muslim countries from early on couched their advocacy in terms of the need to abandon the (implicitly) 'innately' and 'irreparably' misogynic practices of the native culture in favour of the customs and beliefs of another culture - the European. This rhetoric became insistent and pronounced with colonial domination, and it was in this context that the links between the issue of women and the issues of nationalism and culture were permanently forged." And further in the book: "The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used . . . to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples" (ibid. 151).

The discourse on women and the veil both inside the Muslim countries and in the diaspora does not show any sign of abating. Linda Herrera in her article in ISIM 6, 2000 sums up the overall situation: "A wide range of studies on Islamic resurgence all over the Muslim world deal with new veiling, socio-religious practice that has been explained as a form of both resistance and submission to patriarchy, an assertion of cultural authenticity, a reaction against Western imperialism and local secular regimes, a genuine desire by women to live more piously, and a practice born out of economic necessity. While there is a degree of plausibility in each of these theories, especially when taken in tandem, another dimension should be added to the debates on new veiling, and that is a subtle and seemingly growing tendency among many urban Egyptian women towards what can be called 'downveiling'." In her opinion the recent trend of downveiling among women in Cairo is suggestive of the ways in which gendered practices respond and contribute to socio-religious change and are symptoms of changes of the Islamist trend in Egypt.

From a global historical perspective, changes in style of dress and notions of 'appropriate female attire' are driven as much by the market as by changing social and political climates. The adoption of a an identifiable Islamic form of dress can be regarded as a sign of the times. It can signal assertion of independence, separate identity and rejection of Western cultural imperialism. The apparent paradox of a return to the *hijab* among women in the public worlds of

employment and education need not be a sign of 'anti-feminism' but a kind of 'feminism in reverse' having both moral and political meaning. The interweaving of secular and sacred concerns which the adoption of the veil represents can be percieved as a reaction against the secular feminism[6] of the West and as a part of the search for an indigenous Islamic form of protest against male domination (Watson1994: 152).

From the Western feminist's point of view *hijab* fulfills the function of sexual control, the cultural and historical specificity of this institution are rarely examined.and potentially subversive aspects are not considered at all. Wearing a veil, however, can have specific meaning according to the political or cultural context. Iranian middle-class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to show solidarity with their veiled working-class sisters. In contemporary Iran veiling is mandatory. The meaning of the practice in the two cases is clearly different. In the first case wearing hijab is an oppositional, revolutionary gesture, in the second a coercive practice on the part of the state power (Mohanty 1994: 209).

In Mohanty's view, assuming that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries means a universal oppression of women, is both analytically reductive and quite useless for elaborating oppositional political strategy.

Some critics express the view that it is difficult to approach an understanding of the indigenous meaning of *hijab,*[7] if commentary is grounded in notions which derive from a Western cultural context. If debates about the institutions and structures of Muslim society are framed within Western notions of equality, individualism and freedom, the absence of equivalent concepts in Islam can lead to the conclusion that 'sexual equality' within Islam is impossible (Watson 1998: 155). According to Leila Ahmed the emergence of feminist ideas in the West did not result from the fact that Western cultures were less androcentric and misogynic than other societies, but that women in the West could draw on the political vocabularies and systems generated by ideas of democracy and the rights of the individual. She is convinced that political vocabularies and politi-

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[6] Nadje Al-Ali who was doing research among participants of women's movement in Egypt, points to the antagonism and animosity the English term 'feminism' evokes among women in Egypt. They seem to have internalized the way feminists are being portrayed in most Egyptian, and also some Western discourses: men-hating and aggressive. In her writing Al-Ali prefers the term 'women's activism'. The resistance to the term 'feminism' is at the same time linked to the coviction that it detracts from other important issues such as imperialism, class struggle and Zionism (Al-Ali, ISIM 6, 2000).

[7] Fatima Mernissi, a well-known Moroccan feminist, has explored the earliest Islamic traditions in order to identify the original meaning of *hijab*. In her understanding the term means both boundary and protection. It can mean a veil that hides God from men, and also the inability of certain individuals to perceive God. She believes the term originally had a negative connotation. In her view it was by way of manipulation of the sacred texts in later periods that the segregation of sexes was institutionalized. Mernissi's is a minority voice (Mernissi 1991: 96).

cal and civil rights are quite distinct from the cultural and psychological messages. The idea that non-Western women will improve their status by adopting the culture, ways of dress and ways of life of the West is based on the confusion between these different spheres. "Adopting another culture[8] as a general remedy for a heritage of misogyny within a particular culture is not only absurd, it is impossible" (Ahmed 1992: 245).

Until the 1970s, 'Islamic Societies' were considered homogeneous, based on immutable religious foundations. New scholarship underlines the fact that like other people, Muslims face earthly realities, and far from conforming to an ideal, societies with Muslim majorities also comprise diversity and dissention. There are individuals and groups that do not identify themselves as Muslims. They consider themselves as many things including Muslim, or have alternative religious convictions, or simply do not adhere to any creed. However, categorical identifications like 'Islamic countries' still prevailing in academic and non-academic parlance automatically designates Islam as the norm, all others as deviations (Shahidian, ISIM 3, 1999). Instead of the monolithic Islam of the old orientalism, a net of of multifarious Islams has appeared in its place. The search is going on for a new, improved Islam.

From women's point of view this search means challenging dominant readings of the Qur'anic verses, especially that of *Al-Nisa* (Women) which they consider distorted. By presenting their own interpretations, women intend to show that Islam accomodates the equality of rights between women and men. Hammed Shahidian is highly critical of what she calls 'Islamic feminist' threadbare clichés: "We are encouraged to rest content because Qur'anic verses that 'suggest a *more egalitarian* treatment of women are highlighted' in the 'Islamic feminist' revision. But what does it mean to treat women in a 'more egalitarian' manner? Why should women's rights be based on edicts granting but *some degree* of equality?" (ibid.).

The author bitterly complains of cultural relativism[9] reigning large in recent attitudes to non-Westerners. Arguments which, outside the Islamic context,

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[8] In his essay 'Postmodernism and the Rest of the World' R. Radhakrishnan strongly argues for the separation of the truths of one's own tradition from the significances attributed to them by the colonizer: "Are the truths of Islam and Hinduism no different from the form they have been given by Indologists and Orientalists? What are the realities of one's tradition, good and bad, when viewed from within the tradition? Are there traditions other than the ones set up by colonialism in its attempts to essentialize and inferiorize indigenous cultures? The fact of the matter has been that modernity had effectively delegitimized the Hindu critique of Hinduism and and the Islamic critique of Islam.It is as though such critiques did not exist at all and the only critiques available were through the deracinating modernist theories of knowledge" (Radhakrishnan 2000: 59).

[9] There are problems involved in respecting the principle of cultural difference. How does a Western-based 'liberal' 'negotiate with' issues as child marriage, polygyny or cliteridectomy in non-Western societies? By contrast, how are non-Westerners to 'negotiate with' hysterectomy as a treatment for depression, the neglect of the old or (child) pornography in the West? (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 195.)

would not be tolerated, are accepted uncritically when authored by 'insiders'. In her view this betrays a new, more sophisticated form of racism. Instead, Shahidian proposes dialogue. She believes that in a democratic dialogue, non-native critiques do not sound condescending.

Nadje Al-Ali, in her analyses of the notion of secularism and the political culture in which the Egyptian women's movement is situated, tried to transcend concepts of cultures as bounded entities and acknowledge links between cultures and oppositions and encounters within cultures, aiming at abolishing the rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them'. She had to admit that it is still a difficult goal, and so far almost impossible, to reach. She says: "For Egyptian women activists, the notion of 'cultural specificity' becomes more than a tool in the attempt to demarcate themselves from 'the West'. It is also employed to affirm positively their own culture, somehow homogenized and defined as a monolithic entity, thereby discarding cultural differences within Egypt among different social classes, generations, gender, rural and urban people and so forth." Al-Ali expresses the opinion that the attitude to their own culture articulated by the secular women activists is shaped by the fear of transgressing the norms and values deemed permissible within the national fabric, the fear of being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious.Thus the women are caught between the pursuit of modernization, attempts at liberalization, a pervasive nationalist rhetoric of 'authenticity' and processes related to Islamization and ongoing imperialist encroachments" (Al-Ali, ISIM 6, 2000).

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There is no doubt that (neo)colonial history has for a long time played its part in the development of Western feminism, from its exploitation of the rhetoric of the abolitionist movement to facilitate its own emergence in the modern period, through the material contribution of the Bombay-based aunt to the achievement of the 'room of one's own' advocated by Virginia Woolf as one feminist goal, and on to Kristeva's 'appropriation' of Chinese women to constitute contemporary Western feminism (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 201). On the other hand, on the opposite side, the unceasing argument of victimhood as the main ground for insight has caused enough damage. Although the sensibilities of the Third World feminists counteract the tendency toward cultural imperialism of First World theorists who apply the First World concepts globally regardless of their social and historical context, they cannot be invoked indefinitely.

The celebrated American feminist Donna Haraway says with some optimism:

" I do not know of any time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the domination of 'race', 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'class'. I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help to build could have been possible. None of 'us' have any longer the symbolic or material capability of dictating the shape of reality to any of 'them'. Or at least we cannot claim innocence from practicing such domination. White

women, including socialist feminists, discovered (that is, were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category of 'woman'" (Haraway 1993: 278). She believes it is no accident that the symbolic system of the family of man, and the 'essence' of woman, breaks at the time that the connections between people all over the planet become unprecedently multiple and effective. It is no accident that woman disintegrates into women in our time (ibid. 281).

The question is how to evade the risk of lapsing into boundless difference and how to establish connections. Permanent partiality of feminist points of view has political consequences. Haraway, however, is suspect of all totalities. In her view the feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams of a perfectly true language, is a totalizing and imperialist one. Yet, maybe, Donna Haraway with her call for a profound change of consciousness in all of us who live in our high-tech culture, with her affirmation of technologization, can also imagine realities beyond the horizon of today. The unexplored world of tomorrow can offer possibilities exceeding any expectations. So far she offers a poetic vision:

"Here is my location for a utopian intersection of heterogeneous, multi-cultural, 'Western' (coloured, white, European, American, Asian, Pacific) feminist theories of gender hatched in odd siblingship with contradictory, hostile, fruitful, inherited binary dualisms. Phallogocentrism was the egg ovulated by the master subject, the brooding hen to the permanent chickens of history. But into the nest with that literal-minded egg has been placed the germ of a phoenix that will speak in all the tongues of a world turned upside down" (Haraway 1997: 40).

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