

# Veiled Colonialism: A Feminist Criticism of the Half the Sky Movement

Written by Sophia Chong

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SOPHIA CHONG, APR 7 2014

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Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book, film, and social-political movement comprehensively called *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* is at first glance a godsend. As a popular, mainstream women's rights effort, it would appear as if this movement could perhaps be the spark to ignite a push towards women's equality internationally. However, when examining *Half the Sky* in an academic fashion, a disturbing trend comes to light. A common feature which runs throughout the entire program is a heavy overtone of modern-day colonialist sentiment. This brings to question: Can the women whose stories were included ever be fully included themselves with this kind of colonialist discourse? Focusing on the book, this essay will examine the writing mechanisms which are problematic in an attempt to shed light on the subliminal messaging in *Half the Sky* with attention to just one of three issues it presents: prostitution.

### **Discursive Colonialism and the Colonialist Stance**

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The best place to begin is a look into the meaning of modern day colonialism from the feminist perspective, especially Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of "discursive colonialism" and Uma Narayan's concept of the "colonialist stance." Both of these ideas will be vital to understanding the rhetorical issues within *Half the Sky*.

In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," Mohanty (1984) discusses methods of how Westerners conceptualize and discuss the "Third World" (especially "Third World Women") and how this discourse is affecting the feminist movement in these countries. The article studies several different categories Westerners are prone to putting "Third World Women" in, all of which place Westerners in the place of saviors and other women in a place of oppression. These categories are: Women as Universal Dependents, Women as Victims of Male Violence, Married Women as Victims of the Colonial Process, Women and Familial Systems, and Women and the Development Process. Mohanty argues that the Western concept of the "Third World"—and particularly the view of feminism within those countries—can shape how women's issues are perceived by not only those participating in the discussion, but also by the people being discussed. The notion of "discursive colonialism" could then perhaps best be described as indirect imperialism which materializes through the Western discourse surrounding (in this case) women in the "Third World."

Following a similar stream of thought is Narayan's idea of the "colonialist stance," which, though similar to Mohanty's idea discursive colonialism, has its own nuanced differences. Her chapter, "Restoring History and Politics to 'Third World Women'" (1997), is a criticism of author Mary Daly's treatment of *sati* or widow immolation. Narayan takes issue with Daly's sloppy handling of India and Indian cultural traditions, and uses this example to prove a larger point regarding Western presuppositions about inclusion. She discusses how, although Daly included Indian women in her analysis, Daly's failure to provide an accurate portrayal of history and distinctions between diverse Indian cultures is an unfortunately common feature in Western scholarship. Narayan points out that because these Westerners have so much more of a recognized voice when compared to the women they are writing about, it is easy for them to homogenize these women's experiences and to paint a picture of their history and practices that is far from reality. Exercising this power over "Third World Women" by misrepresenting or homogenizing their experiences, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is taking what Narayan calls the "colonialist stance."

Both of these theories of discursive colonialism and the colonialist stance reflect a modern day imperialism often practiced by Westerners which is prevalent and problematic for not only feminism, but almost any international movement. According to both Mohanty and Narayan, colonial presuppositions like these that are so ingrained in much of Western scholarship could actually be acting as a roadblock for the very women that international feminist scholarship is attempting to support by instead keeping them in a marginalized position within the feminist movement. While the problem of rhetoric surrounding women's rights in the "Third World" seems like a relatively simple issue to solve, we can see that not much progress has been made, as these same attitudes can be found in Kristof and WuDunn's book *Half the Sky*, which serves as a prime example of modern-day colonialist attitudes.

## **Relationships between Westerners and Non-Western Women**

What is perhaps the book's most obvious example of modern-day colonialist sentiment can be seen in the interactions between Westerners and non-Western women. Throughout the entire book, there is the recurring appearance of the "white savior", or perhaps more accurately the "Western savior", who has come to rescue "Third World" women from a variety of oppressors, including their governments, religions, cultures, or most commonly "Third World" men. Interactions in the book constantly reflect and even highlight an unequal relationship, with Westerners on top and non-Westerners below within the power hierarchy.

In a section of Chapter 2 entitled "Rescuing Girls Is the Easy Part," we see Kristof literally taking on the role as a savior to two prostitutes in Cambodia whom he rescues by valiantly buying them off of their pimps. Kristof and WuDunn then proceed to set the women up with alternative means to make a living and send them on their merry way to begin their lives anew. Kristof and WuDunn then lament the results of their follow-up because one of the girls returned to her brothel because of meth addiction. The authors also include accounts of conversations between them and women from other countries, all the while continuing to subliminally assert the fact they are heroes who are giving non-Western women a voice, compassion, or even a rare taste of the golden American society.

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Without even discussing the interactions themselves, the language *describing* the interactions between the authors and the women poses several issues on its own. Kristof and WuDunn are guilty of not only modern-day colonialist sentiments, but also of overt objectification. While they claim to be feminist writers, they not only devote at least a paragraph to physically describing each woman whose stories they include, but they also usually have a photograph of her. However, they neglect describing the physical appearance of any men they encounter. This attitude of interacting with women based largely on their appearance seems as if it belongs in a 1950s advertisement, rather than a recent women's rights book. They also interject many seemingly surprised statements about the women's behavior which they would not expect to see from the stereotypical "Third World woman." Traits such as forwardness, strength, or confidence are met with pleasant shock because Kristof and WuDunn clearly accept stereotypes of non-Western women and are surprised when women of that background do not behave as popular conception dictates they act. Another issue with their linguistic choices is their overt infantilizing of non-Western women, exhibited by their failure to refer to the women as "women," instead calling them "girls" regardless of their age. Of course, there are females in sexual slavery who are so young that it would be wrong to refer to them as anything but "girls," but to refer to all prostitutes as "girls" reflects a definite paternalistic attitude.

Examining the relationships themselves closer, we can see that even the authors' interactions with the women were experienced through the colonialist stance. One of the explicit examples of this is how Kristof is charged with discovering these women's stories and then deciding whether or not to buy and liberate them. Elevating a white male to this position of absolute power over the fate of another human being creates a multitude of problems, among them encouraging stereotypes surrounding not only non-Western women, but also non-Western men. This relationship of unequal power maintains presuppositions about non-Western populations including the idea that those in the "Third World" are in a sense not human enough to handle their own affairs without the worldly wisdom or influence of a Westerner. However, the reality is that these attitudes are unhelpful to the women's liberation they say they are advocating for, because of the colonialist attitudes which the interactions shown in the book perpetuate.

## **The Homogenization of Non-Western People**

Another way in which Kristof and WuDunn exercise both the Western colonialist stance and discursive colonialism is their homogenization of the people they discuss. Though this section covers a multitude of different countries, Kristof and WuDunn make it simple to forget that fact and to mentally group all of the individuals into "Third World people." Based on this section of *Half the Sky*, it would be easy to assume that prostitution is the same throughout the "Third World," or perhaps even that all the "Third World" population engages in prostitution. However, there is no possibility that a concept like that could be accurate. The authors fail to acknowledge the fact that each person will have their own distinct identity and experiences, making it wrong to categorize individuals, let alone categorizing entire countries.

In *Half the Sky* there is plenty of unfair categorization, especially between the sexes. Again following the "white savior" theme that was present in the interactions between Kristof and the prostitutes, this section can almost seem reminiscent of films like Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), in which a morally upright and forward-thinking white man rescues an ethnic woman from both the cruel ethnic men of her community and the archaic environment she lives in. All the women prostitutes in *Half the Sky* are shown as tragically beautiful victims who are put into terrible situations by "Third World" society. The women who are brave or able enough to attempt escape are almost always brought back into bondage by the men who "own" them, or corrupt policemen. With few exceptions, almost all the men are portrayed as terrible power-obsessed tyrants who forces young women into sexual slavery for personal gain. This is problematic for both sexes.

By portraying non-Western women as victims, the *Half the Sky* movement is actually taking power from them. Kristof and WuDunn force their own conceptions about these women into the book when it is simply untrue. Of course, their goal is to motivate people to become international women's advocates, so they will portray the issue in a way that will further that cause. While of course raising awareness of the issues is a noble cause, they sacrifice accuracy in order to convey their message. Kristof and WuDunn gloss over realities and rely on shocking statistics which may be true, but do not give the reader a grasp on what is actually happening with prostitution in these countries. These women who speak out about sexual slavery have endured horrors in their lifetime, but that is not to say that all women in

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these countries are victims. Encouraging this notion makes the issue more alarming to the reader and is therefore more likely to mobilize them which is the authors' main goal. However, at the same time it perpetuates the stereotype that all women in these countries are weak and unable to effectively advocate for themselves, which can take away their voice within the feminist movement and within international politics in general. These women are individuals like any other woman, with unique experiences and ideas.

While the book is centered on feminist issues, the homogenization of men in *Half the Sky* should be mentioned as well, because though it may not necessarily be as relevant as the issues surrounding women, it is just as wrong. In the book, the most common male figures included are the pimps and the police. The stories about the pimps show the men kidnapping, beating, raping, and generally torturing the women, whereas the stories about the police are all about either their corruption and participation in prostitution or their lack of effectiveness. Either way, the image of the non-Western man is not a positive one. However, what about the countless fathers, brothers, sons, and other male loved ones who must suffer endlessly knowing that a woman dear to them is living in sexual slavery? Not only must they cope with this struggle, but they must face the fact that they failed to protect the females in their lives, which is still a typical and worldwide societal expectation for the male gender role. It is unfair for Kristof and WuDunn to neglect these men, because while there are horrible men committing horrible acts, they are not the only men in the non-Western world, and men in these countries should not be portrayed this way.

The main issue with this grouping is again the perpetuation of stereotypes and insensitive homogenization which it encourages. Similar to the portrayal of *sati* in the article Narayan criticized, the portrayal of prostitution in non-Western countries employs the colonialist stance in that it overgeneralizes the issue in these countries in order to further another cause. Instead of gaining an understanding of the status of prostitution in the countries included, readers of *Half the Sky* are far more likely to come away with the message that Non-Western countries are terrible places populated by helpless women and misogynistic men. Acting as a vicious cycle, non-Western people then view Westerners (especially Americans) as ignorant and uninformed, which can make these people resistant to Western assistance. After all, who would want help from people who see you as a tragic charity case instead of a human being, people who will never understand your experiences, and will also not make a genuine effort to empathize with you? Western colonialist attitudes prevent the assistance to these people from being as effective as it potentially could be. It should also be mentioned that Kristof and WuDunn include exclusively non-Western countries with the exception of one paragraph devoted to Europe. However, the fact that prostitution is also a major issue in other regions (including America) should not be overlooked. With the amount of overt homogenization of several groups, it is easy to forget the facts and to look at sexual slavery as a problem foreign to the West.

## **Colonialist Solutions**

Kristof and WuDunn present a few solutions to the problem of sexual slavery, each more guilty of colonialist attitudes than the others. It is, of course, helpful for the authors to include avenues for assisting women working as prostitutes, but do these proposals seem like possible cures for the issue of international sexual slavery? The answer: Probably not, but they can serve as an avenue for the motivations of Westerners.

One of the potential remedies included in *Half the Sky* is the education of young women in high-risk areas. While the solution itself is perhaps a wonderful notion, the example that is used is a perfect example of modern-day colonialism. Kristof and WuDunn glorify the Overlake School in Cambodia, which is funded by students, parents, and teachers from the Overlake School in America. In order to incentivize girls to attend, they also set up a fund that will pay their families a stipend to offset potentially lost wages. While the effort and result is superb, the attitudes it perpetuates and the likelihood that this could be a widespread solution are not as positive. This story continues the "white savior" theme by portraying Westerners as philanthropic kind-hearted souls who want to rescue girls in the "Third World" from otherwise imminent sexual slavery. It is true that many of the areas the authors discuss are impoverished and that education is not typically widely available. However, this plan of direct imperialist action undermines the governments of that area and again perpetuates the stereotype that non-Western countries are all failed states. While the results may have been mildly successful in Cambodia, it is unrealistic to believe that the solution to the issue of slavery in the international sphere is more American-funded schools around the world, as it is not economically, socially, or logistically feasible.

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Though it may initially sound outrageous, *Half the Sky's* other potential solution to the issue is participating in the sex trade yourself. As was mentioned earlier, Kristof is shown entering two brothels, befriending the prostitutes he was shown, and buying them off of their pimps. Kristof and WuDunn then proceed to bring them back to their hometowns and supposedly ensure they have a means of an income. They do this without any regard to the intense psychological scarring, lack of education, potential community exclusion, or physical addiction to illicit substances, all of which would require much more than some money and a ride back home to solve. In addition to these problems, and the glaring issues of paternalism discussed earlier, there is also the fact that this plan was simply not well thought out. One must have an overly-idealistic mind to think that this would improve the situation of the sex trade in the slightest bit. It may be nice to think that two women experienced their taste of freedom, but the good feeling disappears when you realize that the money Kristof spent buying these women's liberty will almost definitely be spent bringing in a new stock of women who will likely not be freed by a Western feminist.

Another issue is that each of the solutions has a heavy emphasis on how the experiences of assisting the "Third World" affected the Westerners, as opposed to the non-Western people who were supposed to be the ones experiencing the change. Not only does this selfishly shift the focus to the Westerners, but it also raises questions about the motivations behind these presumed acts of charity. Again, this lowers the position of non-Western people even further by portraying them as stepping stones for a variety of personal motivations such as absolution of "First World Guilt" or fame as a saint-like figure (like the fame Kristof and WuDunn have come into), which can be achieved by helping the "Third World" population.

## **Conclusion**

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky* is a popular recent examination of women's rights issues internationally. However, based on the interactions, homogenization, and solutions proposed in *Half the Sky*, it is clearly a book which encourages modern-day Western colonialist attitudes towards non-Western countries. Is it better to have more people informed about feminist causes through the colonialist lens? Or would it be preferable for people to not be informed at all because it will strengthen their colonial presuppositions? There are strong arguments for both sides; however, it is evident that regardless of how the book should be received that it is in fact guilty of both discursive colonialism and the colonialist stance.

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