

The Limits of Unlearning: Liberal Feminism from the Postcolonial Perspective

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/06/24/the-limits-of-unlearning-liberal-feminism-from-the-postcolonial-perspective/>

HANNAH BUTT, JUN 24 2011

Critical theorist, Robert Cox, famously wrote, “theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose” (1981, p. 128). By arguing that theory can never be objective, Cox thus establishes an important relationship between theory and theorist. The aforementioned challenge from Spivak, for scholars to “unlearn” their learning and their privilege, is an intervention into that relationship. Spivak writes from a postcolonialist perspective, a paradigm which turns Cox’s statement on its head, arguing that in western scholarship theory is always written for someone *white* and *western*, and for the purpose of, implicitly or explicitly, supporting racist hierarchies of oppression and exploitation. Spivak is one of many postcolonial writers to have directed this critique at the work of liberal feminism, arguing that western feminists participate in discursive colonization when they appropriate the experiences of non-white and non-western women to support arguments which seek only to better their own position (Mohanty, 1988, p. 62).

This paper is a critical exploration of the problems in liberal feminism from the postcolonial perspective; examining the responses of Spivak and other postcolonialist feminists, who have attempted to reconcile the postcolonial critique with liberal feminism’s emancipatory agenda. Consequently, this paper addresses the question: is the relationship between theorist and theory a conscious one, into which processes such as “unlearning” may intervene? I will be arguing that we are, to a certain extent, trapped in our experiences as colonisers and colonised, and in our resulting positions of power or powerlessness. For this reason, representation of “subaltern women” or “women of colour”, by white western liberal feminists remains a problematic endeavour, since tied up in the notion of representation are the complications of power, knowledge and language. By exploring these issues, this paper offers an insight into the wider consequences for representation in IR.

In order to introduce the debates outlined above, this paper will first give a brief outline of liberal feminism, and then address the common thread which links together the authors included in this paper, and makes them postcolonial writers. Following this, I will summarize the reasons why postcolonial thinkers have criticised liberal feminism, before moving on to the main task of exploring the prescriptions of selected postcolonial feminists. This will include Spivak’s suggestion of “unlearning”, and will consider their limited ability to resolve the problems in western liberal feminism highlighted by postcolonialism.

Liberal feminism played a significant role in the 1960s and 70s women’s liberation movement in the US and Britain, but has also been expressed by much earlier writers, such as Mary Wollstencraft (Tong, 1998, pp. 15-23). Liberal feminism is driven by an emancipatory vision; it aims to highlight inequalities faced by women, and address these through legal and political reform (Tickner and Sjoberg, 2007, p. 188). Liberal feminist writing, therefore, draws attention to the various forms of oppression which women around the world are subject to, and seeks change through the removal of legal obstacles to gender equality (Ibid, p. 188). The liberal feminist normative vision of the emancipation of women is thus one which is assumed to be both possible and universally applicable (Hutchings, 2007, pp. 92-93). Liberal feminist scholarship and liberal feminist activism are closely linked. I will, therefore, be addressing issues, as seen by postcolonial writers, inherent in the liberal feminist *Weltanschauung*, which permeate both scholarship and activism.

With cross-border migration, the question of who, or what, is “postcolonial” is an increasingly complex one, thus

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“postcolonial” may refer to men and women from a variety of backgrounds (Mohanram, 1999, p. p. 179). Postcolonialist writers argue that western academia, while masquerading as disinterested in imperialism, colludes in perpetuating racist structures and relations (Spivak, 1999, p. 208; Grovogui, 2007, p. 230). A key goal of postcolonialism, therefore, is facilitating progression past the legacy of colonialism, and it offers a number of ways of achieving this. One such strategy involves the opening of space for the disenfranchised “Other” to speak. While rejecting the “narrative of the oppressed” which has dominated western writing on the subaltern (Spivak, 1988, p. 61), Spivak argues that western scholars who neglect non-western subjects, shirk their responsibility to the disempowered (Ibid, p. 104). Historian Chakrabarty offers an alternative approach to postcolonialism, challenging the damaging effects of a Eurocentric view of history (2000, p. 4). Chakrabarty highlights the way European historical texts continue to be glorified as the foundations of modern political thought, while non-European texts are considered historical relics (Ibid, pp. 5-6). Furthermore, the dominant Eurocentric timeline of history supports racist power structures, by measuring the progress of other cultures in terms of their “distance” from Western modernity. This ideology of progress was used to justify colonialism, deeming certain societies not yet ready for self-rule and consigning them to the “waiting room of history” (Ibid, pp. 8-10), and it continues to be facilitated in the labelling of parts of the world as “developing”, according to their ability to impersonate Western “progress”.

As well as its critical dimension, postcolonialism promulgates new ways of formulating knowledge by applying “local” memories, arts and sciences to traditional schools of thought, such as history and philosophy (Grovogui, 2007, p. 231). These alternative truth claims challenge the European hegemony; diversifying our understanding of the colonised world, and disputing the traditional perspective of Europe by viewing it through the lens of the colonised (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 16).

Having broadly introduced the theoretical subjects of this paper, I will now proceed by focussing in on the work of various postcolonial critics, who have interrogated liberal feminism, and identifying the common threads that tie these authors together as postcolonialists.

The main criticism to have emerged from the cross-section of authors whose work I have sampled, and which validates the label of “postcolonial” for each, is that the appropriation of women of colour’s experiences by liberal feminist writers, and thus by the liberal feminist movement, constitutes “*discursive colonization*” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 61). The authors draw different examples into their work; Loomba highlights the paternalistic patterns amongst westerners writing about Indian women that have carried over from the imperial age (2006, p. 315), while Amos and Parmer berate the way cross-cultural studies employ black women’s experiences for “exotic comparison” (2006, p. 287). However, the authors agree that when the “authentic experiences” of women of colour are featured in the work of liberal feminists, it is not for their benefit (Radcliffe, 1994, p. 28).

Within this discursive colonization lies a deeper problem; that of the *misrepresentation* of women of colour as monolithic, and as victims (Lorde, 2006, p. 298; Mohanty, 1988, pp. 65-66; Radcliffe, 1994, p. 26; Spivak, 1988; p. 84). Mohanty expresses this most explicitly, criticising the sloppy methodologies of liberal feminists who vaguely write about “Women of Africa” or “Women of the Middle East”, homogenizing the experiences of vast groups of women (1988, p. 68). This approach erases the stories of those who resist oppression, and the monolithic “Third World Woman” is thus presented as a victim, and the privileged recipient of first world concern (Radcliffe, 1994, p. 26). Related to this is the *exclusion* of women of colour from mainstream feminist discourse. Lugones and Spelman passionately argue the importance of self-representation by postcolonial women, not just because of the potential inaccuracy of someone else’s account, but also because “the articulation of our experience is part of our experience” (1983, pp. 573-574). A further dimension of this problem is that women of colour must constantly highlight their exclusion, rather than being able to fully participate in liberal feminist discourse (Radcliffe, 1994, p. 27).

The fourth key criticism of liberal feminism relates to the failure of western writers to acknowledge that oppression of women may vary according to race, class, and ethnicity. There are a number of interrelated problems which arise from the essentialist claim that female oppression is universal (Fuss, 1989, p. 2). Firstly, only women who do not feel vulnerable in relation to other parts of their identity are able to identify their voice simply as a “woman’s voice” (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 574). In order to relate to the liberal feminist ideology, women of colour must create a “schizophrenic split” in themselves between their identity as a woman, and their race or ethnicity (Ibid, p. 576).

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Secondly, this “white solipsism”, (Spelman, 2006, p. 274) leads to a misunderstanding of the kind of liberation that women of colour seek (Amos and Parmer, 2006, p. 286). Finally, reluctance to recognise differences between women also disregards the relational nature of those differences; the fact that middle-class women are able to live the lives they do precisely because working-class white, Black and Latina women live the lives they do (Barkley-Brown, 2006, p. 302). In sum, racism and sexism are not separate forms of oppression for women of colour, and thus the statement, “We are all women” is inadequate in many respects (Spelman, 2006, pp. 277-278).

The final thread which has emerged from the various postcolonial critics relates to the lack of awareness of the impact that theory has on those who are theorised about (Lorde, 2006, p. 298; Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 579; Mohanty, 1988, pp. 62-63; Spivak, 1988, p. 91). In liberal feminist writings there is inadequate self-consciousness about the ability of academia to discourage women’s movements in the Third World (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 62-63). In response, postcolonialists call for greater accountability, amongst liberal feminists, to those they theorise about (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 579).

Through exploring these criticisms of liberal feminist scholarship several responses have emerged by writers who seek to reconcile the postcolonial critique with liberal feminism’s international emancipatory vision. This paper will subsequently address three key suggestions from postcolonial writers, and assess how far their prescriptions go towards reconciling the liberal feminist emancipatory agenda with postcolonialism.

The first suggestion I would like to consider is that put forward by Ien Ang. Ang suggests that feminism, rather than attempting to be completely inclusive, should develop a consciousness of its limits as a theory (2003, p. 191). According to Ang, feminism has previously attempted to “absorb” difference within pre-defined boundaries. Yet, in order to remain relevant to women of colour, feminism must abandon these efforts, and open itself up to ambiguity (Ibid, p. 191). This response is characteristic of “third-wave feminism”, which, in the light of postcolonial criticisms, has attempted to overcome the difficulties surrounding the question of who the feminist movement represents (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002, p. 125). Ang’s recommendation is consistent with the third-wave feminist rejection of a single female identity, instead emphasising individuality and variety. This anti-essentialist stance draws much from Derrida’s deconstruction of “the woman”, and his argument that “woman” is not a stable category over varying historical and cultural contexts (Fuss, 1989, p. 14).

The strength of this response lies in its potential to expand feminism’s relevance to women of colour. Ang’s suggestion does not deal directly with “discursive colonization”, however it does widen the ability of feminism to resolve the problems of misrepresentation, and exclusion in liberal feminism. Through a more ambiguous definition of female identity, greater scope is available to confront the spectrum of oppression that different women face, and to explore the links between racism and sexism for women of colour. Furthermore, the “self-conscious” nature of the reappraisal of feminism which Ang suggests could stimulate a greater awareness of the link between theory and practice in feminism, thus ensuring that western liberal feminist writing does not ostracize postcolonial women’s movements.

Yet, despite the ability of Ang’s suggestions for liberal feminism to confront the postcolonial critique, there are problems with this approach. The loss of a common identity in third-wave feminism weakens the theory’s ability to analyse oppression of “women” as anything more than disparate, scattered incidents. Thus, the rallying of a movement around an emancipatory agenda is made conceptually difficult, compromising liberal feminism’s political commitment to reform (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002, p. 126). At a fundamental level, by accepting gender as a social construct, and one which is constructed in different ways according to historical and cultural context, the concept of “feminism” is itself endangered, since “gender” is not a consistent, or meaningful, category which can be “translated” across cultures. These problems culminate in fears that unity may be lost through differentiation; however this is not the only alternative to the previous belief that “one size fits all”.

Mohanty is one such author who challenges perceptions in academia that Eurocentric discourse is universal, but does not see this as a dead end for the representation of women of colour by white feminists (2003, p. 502-504). Mohanty offers methodological advice, attempting to facilitate cross-cultural scholarship that is egalitarian and non-colonizing. By focussing positive attention on differences between women, Mohanty believes that the commonalities

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which link the feminist movement together may be strengthened (Ibid, p. 530). She calls on western liberal feminists who write cross-cultural studies, to begin by identifying the *particularities* of a case study, and then working “upwards” to reach an understanding of how the particular reflects the universal. This challenges the methodology frequently used in cross-cultural studies, which makes universal claims about vast swathes of the female population, and then uses case studies to “prove” them. Mohanty’s prescription therefore challenges the way this methodology both misrepresents and discursively colonizes women of colour’s experiences. Furthermore, Mohanty’s prescription aims towards an understanding of the impact that vague western scholarship has upon the unique individuals whose experiences are theorised about (Ibid, p. 501). Therefore, the only postcolonial criticism which is not resolved is the exclusion of women of colour.

Mohanty’s argument is a subversion of the traditional Hegelian three part dialectic, which proceeds from a statement of universality, to particularity, and finally to individuality (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002, p. 113). Mohanty use of Hegelian terminology arguably signifies a conscious rejection of the conventional “universal to individual” approach. According to the author, this approach erases the significance of the particular, while prematurely claiming to have discovered universally relevant truths (Ibid, p. 501). On the other hand, to begin on the level of the particular and work upwards offers a greater chance of learning how the individual fits into universal trends and patterns.

Mohanty’s suggestion offers a clear means for liberal feminists to pursue an emancipatory agenda; however, this approach is not without its weaknesses. Returning to the comparison with Hegel, the criticisms of Hegel’s triad may also be applied to Mohanty’s subversion of this dialectical structure. Theorists Adorno and Lacan both criticised Hegel by arguing that, by claiming to know the final stage of the dialectic, Hegel presumes to know and be able to describe absolute truth (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002, p. 115). In the same way, the dialectical structure proposed by Mohanty also assumes that there is a universal and discoverable truth, which overcomes the differences between the individualities and particularities.

Finally, we come to the consideration of Spivak’s suggestion that western scholars must “unlearn their learning” and “unlearn their privilege as loss”. To “unlearn one’s learning” is to realise that having learnt racism, one may reverse this (Spivak et al, 1996, p. 4). This reversal involves recognition of one’s situation in, and contribution to, an institution of neo-colonial learning (Darius et al, 1993, p. 24), and of the ability of western scholarship to reinforce structures of domination (Mohanty, 1988, p. 62). To “unlearn one’s privilege as loss” goes one step further and asks us to trace how our privileges, be they in race or gender, may have prevented us from gaining certain types of knowledge (Spivak et al, 1996, pp. 4-5). Having grasped that there are things about the “Other” that we will never fully understand, we should then seek to learn about these people’s experiences, so that we may engage in real conversations with them through theory, where they are able to relate to our work and respond meaningfully (Spivak, 1990, p. 42).

Spivak’s prescription is important in its recognition of the impact of colonialism on the coloniser, as well as the colonised. In relation to the postcolonial critique of liberal feminism, “unlearning” deals with each criticism on the level of the individual. By unlearning racism, the postcolonial individual will not be inclined to participate in discursive colonialism, or the misrepresentation of women of colour. Through the process of unlearning one’s privilege as loss, liberal feminist authors will come to realise their inadequacies in understanding certain subjects, and thus are more likely to encourage the participation of more experienced subaltern women. Furthermore, to “unlearn” according to Spivak’s prescription is to become aware of how our experiences shape the forms of knowledge which are available to us, thus inherently tackling the Eurocentric vision of universal female oppression. Finally, Spivak’s process of unlearning directly confronts European ignorance of the impact of western scholarship, by calling for writers to seek out first hand experience of those who they theorise about.

However, while Spivak’s notion of unlearning confronts the various postcolonial criticisms of liberal feminism, and provides a means for liberal feminists to promote an emancipatory agenda without colonizing their subject, it does this on the level of the individual, leaving systemic problems unchallenged. Yet the role played by academic institutions and systems of knowledge production is, as Chakrabarty identifies, critical in the perpetuation of imperial hierarchies in the postcolonial era. Spivak’s seminal work asks the question “can the subaltern speak?”, and the notion of “unlearning” gives the subaltern a voice through more privileged individuals (1988). However, a further

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question is “can the subaltern be heard?”, and I would suggest that, in order to confront the systematic exclusion of subaltern voices from international academia, a more radical reappraisal of the postcolonial legacy must be considered.

The success of Spivak’s process of “unlearning” fundamentally rests on whether one believes that colonial hierarchies are “un-learnable”. This is dependent on one’s perspective of the relationship between theory and theorist. Even with an awareness of imperial structures, I would suggest that there are limits to the extent that one may extract oneself from the effects of those structures. For the process of unlearning to be successful, there must be a level of detachment between theorist and theory-making which I am not convinced by.

These three responses to the postcolonial critique of liberal feminism offer three different approaches to resolving the tensions between the two paradigms. Used in conjunction with each other, they challenge colonialism in the individual (Spivak), in the methodology (Mohanty) and in the ideology (Ang), thus offering a wide scope for confronting the tensions between postcolonialism and liberal feminism. Yet there are residual problems which I have found these responses unable to resolve. In this final concluding section, I will be analysing these remaining inadequacies, in order to argue that neither Ang’s, Mohanty’s nor Spivak’s prescriptions are able to fully reconcile liberal feminism’s emancipatory agenda with the postcolonial critique.

There are what I see as two areas of interrelated tension remaining between liberal feminism and postcolonialism; language, and the “power-knowledge nexus”. In the responses of Ang, Mohanty and Spivak, the problem of language is not explicitly confronted and thus provides a stumbling block in understanding the complexities of representation. The most obvious problem in language is the hegemony that European languages have in academia. This is noted by Lugones and Spelman, who criticise the way that the “Other” must speak to the Anglo woman in English; the language of her experiences, and the language she has used to form theories (1983, p. 575). Accounts from women of colour in a non-European language are ignored or, at best, selectively used for “exotic” value. The subaltern may be able to speak, but only in the hegemonic tongue, and only through hegemonic forums, not to each other. Further to this, is the issue of “translating” concepts. Not only is the terminology used in IR theory inherently exclusive, it has the additional effect of “Europeanising” modes of expression. As Radcliffe points out, the way different cultures envisage concepts such as “identity”, “liberation”, or “power” may not be easily translatable in cross-cultural discourse (1994, p. 28). This presents a fundamental problem for the concept of “emancipation” in liberal feminist dialogue, and one which cannot be resolved through the opening up of feminism, as suggested by Ang, the revision of methodology as prescribed by Mohanty, or the self-conscious “unlearning” proposed by Spivak.

Linked to this are problems relating to the “power-knowledge nexus”; the understanding that certain forms of knowledge are also forms of social power (Graeber, 2006, p. 4). This Foucauldian relationship between power and knowledge is interchangeable; those in positions of power have the ability to participate in knowledge production, and those who have acquired knowledge are more powerful than those who do not. In the postcolonial context, this has a number of implications. Firstly, as discussed earlier, knowledge claims have often supported and sustained racist imperial structures. Furthermore, the position of power that white western feminists have allows them to contribute to theory more easily than women of colour. Finally, the white western feminists’ understanding of the European foundations of modern political thought, gives these writers an inalienable advantage over their “subaltern” contemporaries. In order for an outsider “Other” to participate in internationally recognised western discourse; they must be able to imitate the modes of thinking and conceptual frameworks of European political thought. This issue is the focal point of historian Chakrabarty’s work, as touched upon earlier, and it is a problem which is not dealt with by the three responses explored here. It is apparent to me that we are not yet in a position where the white western feminist’s privilege is her loss, because western academia does not yet value the “losses” of the subaltern woman as a privilege, which qualifies her to represent the subaltern. Until alternative forms of knowledge production are recognised equally alongside European ones, the white liberal feminist will experience privilege as privilege, while the “Other” subaltern female will experience loss as loss, and writings of the former about the latter will continue to have an element of the “white woman saving the brown woman from the brown man” about them, to misquote Spivak (1988, p. 92).

The problems of language and of the power-knowledge nexus have, therefore, demonstrated that the notion of

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“unlearning” has its limits in reconciling the liberal feminist agenda with the postcolonial critique. The admirable efforts of both Ang and Mohanty, which aim to expand and introduce ambiguity into feminism, and particularize cross-cultural studies, exploring what the individual may teach us about the universal, are also inadequate in confronting the tensions between these two paradigms. While I do not believe that the relationship between the theorist and theory is fixed, I have aimed to illuminate that there are limits to how far one may escape one’s own experiences, and one’s position within global structures of privilege and loss. In other words, “The best that we can then know is the contradictions and inconsistencies, both in the world and in our knowledge of the world, but we cannot presume to escape them” (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002, p. 115). This essay has explored the notion of representation in theory, a process which is an integral part of international relations, and found it to be problematic. Inherent in representation is a relationship of power between theorist and theorised, and though self-awareness of this may go some way to eliminating this tension, there are limits to this.

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Date written: May 2010

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