

## **Transnational, Third World, and Global Feminisms**

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Third world, transnational, and global feminisms focus on the situation of racial-ethnic women originating from the third world (or the South), whether or not they reside in the first world (or the North or West). This entry refers to these women as “third world women.” Most second-wave white feminisms in the West—liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, or “care-focused” feminisms (Tong 2009)—have assumed that women everywhere face similar oppression merely by virtue of their sex/gender. Global feminism as it first emerged in the 1980s was largely a global application of this white feminist outlook. Third world and transnational feminisms emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s to challenge this white feminist assumption. These feminisms are predicated on the premise that women’s oppression diverges globally due to not only gender, but also race, class, ethnicity, religion, and nation. Therefore, third world women suffer from multiple forms of oppression qualitatively different from the gender oppression experienced by middle-class white women in the West. Third world and transnational feminisms are distinct, however, not only in their origins and outlooks, but also in their goals and priorities.

This entry begins by examining the genealogies of these feminisms, in the process of which their differences will be identified. It then explains four main characteristics that these feminisms share. After reviewing some instances of third world, transnational, and global feminist activities, the entry concludes by suggesting a way to resolve a potential conflict between the local and the universal facing third world, transnational, and global feminists.

## GENEALOGIES

### Global Feminism

The term “global feminism” was first adopted and circulated in the 1980s among white feminists in the West. It should, however, be distinguished from “international feminism,” which presupposes “existing configurations of nation-states as discrete and sovereign entities” (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, p.73; see also Nagar and Swarr, p.4). As discussed below, global feminism advocates transcending national boundaries. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, African American and black feminists residing in the West began to criticize the implicit racism and imperialism of second-wave white feminists, which led to their obliviousness to complex and multiple oppressions of third world women and dismissiveness of third world women’s agency (Amos and Parmar 1984; Carby 1997; Combahee River Collective 1979; Lorde 1984; Sandoval 1991). Global feminism emerged among white feminists in order to accommodate such criticisms. Consequently, global feminism attempted to recognize diversity in women’s oppression across the globe (Bunch 1987; Morgan 1984).

However, the single-minded focus on gender as the primary cause of women’s oppression worldwide led white feminists to believe that third world women were suffering from the same kind of oppression as white women, that is, patriarchy (Bunch 1987, p. 304). Most notably, Robin Morgan argued that “*women as a world political force*” is predicated on the fact that “female human beings *per se* [have] become ‘other,’ the invisible” in “virtually all existing countries [in which] the standard for being human is being male” (1984, p. 1, original italics). According to Morgan, women have “shared attitudes” because of “a *common condition* which,

despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female” (p. 4, original italics). Based on “a shared biology,” women all over the world must launch a “*coordinated*” resistance (p. 34, original italics) against a universal “patriarchal mentality” (p. 1). This “global sisterhood” movement “must move beyond the concept of nation-state” (Bunch 1987, p. 301). As feminists attempt to “expand the commonality and solidarity” of women’s struggle, they must overcome “social forces that divide women from each other,” such as “race, class, sexual orientation, colonialism, poverty, religion, nationality” (p. 303).

### **Third World Feminisms**

Chandra Mohanty was one of the first third world feminists to have forcefully and effectively criticized global feminism for conceiving of patriarchy as monolithically universal and women as “a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives, goals and similar experiences” (1987, p. 33). She argued that these ahistorical conceptions imply “the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism” that vastly complicate third world women’s oppression (p. 34). Mohanty also recognized that such homogenization and historical reductionism result in “the production of the ‘third world woman’ as a singular monolithic subject” (1991a, p. 51), based on the culturally imperialist assumption that the third world “just has not evolved to the extent that the West has” (p. 72). The “average” third world woman is then conceived as leading “an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.),” which contrasts with “the (implicit) self-representation of Western women” as liberated (p. 56). This “colonialist move”

results in depriving third world women of “their historical and political *“agency”*” (p. 72, italics in the original).

Mohanty correctly recognized that women do not share a biological essence and that third world women’s oppressions are diverse, depending on how race, class, ethnicity, and nation intersect. What unites third world women is their “oppositional *political* relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures” (1991b, p. 7). There is no “homogeneous configuration of third world women” sharing “a ‘gender’ or a ‘race’ or a ‘nation’” (p. 5) to form concrete communities, but only “imagined communities” of third world women from diverse social and geographical locations, brought together by their political opposition to pervasive and systemic domination (p. 4). Therefore, feminist theorizations about third world women’s oppression must involve “autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (Mohanty 1991a, p. 51).

In later works, Mohanty emphasizes that “grounded, particularized analyses” of third world women’s oppression must be “linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks” (2002, p. 501). Indeed, the overarching aim of Mohanty’s feminism has become the achievement of “noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders” (p. 503) under the conditions of tightly integrated “global capitalism” (p. 509). Mohanty urges a “shift” in feminist analyses from “the local, regional and national” to relations and processes “across cultures” so that the local is understood in relation to “the larger cross-national processes” of the global economy. Despite her recent advocacy of the “transnational feminist praxis” (Mohanty and Alexander 1997, p. xix), Mohanty still focuses on third world women’s standpoint as providing “the most

inclusive viewing of systemic power” (2002, p. 511), for “it is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South ... that global capitalism writes its script.” It is only by focusing on these women’s experiences that we can “demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism and envision anticapitalist resistance” (p. 514).

### **Transnational Feminisms**

In understanding transnational feminisms, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994) might be a good place to start, as it is considered by some third world feminists as “canonical in defining and conceptualizing transnational feminisms” (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 9). Like Mohanty, Grewal and Kaplan are also critical of global feminism for its dismissal of “the diversity of women’s agency” in its construction of “a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender” (1994, pp. 17–18). They characterize the contemporary world as “postmodernity,” which is the socio-politico-economic condition in the age of neoliberal capitalist globalization (p. 4). Under conditions of postmodernity, the power is no longer centered in the metropole but scattered around the globe as the capital is dispersed following the movements of a few hundred multinational corporations (p. 10). The binary division of “center-periphery” or “global-local” elides the “fact that the parameters of the local and global ... are permeable constructs” (p. 11), as “transnational linkages influence every level of social existence” (p. 13). The multifaceted and multidimensional nature of transnational postmodernity generates “scattered hegemonies,” such as “global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-judicial oppression on multiple levels” (p. 17), replacing “the European unitary subject” (p. 7).

Under such circumstances, Grewal and Kaplan argue, feminists must concentrate on “articulat[ing] the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies” by understanding “the dynamics of the material conditions” of women transnationally (1994, p. 17). The purpose should not be to construct a master theory of gender oppression that subsumes the diversity of women’s conditions, but rather to “compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions” faced by women in their concrete locations. Ultimately, transnational feminisms ought to enable women working to dismantle various forms of patriarchal practices in different communities to create coalitions, affiliations, or transnational solidarities. In forming such coalitions, the determining factor is their participation in resistant praxis and not their identity (pp. 18, 19, 26).

### **Post-2000 Trends**

The term “global feminism” is undergoing a resurgence despite earlier critiques of universalizing tendencies of white global feminism. Many feminists, both white and third world, use the term to refer to their work relating to global feminist issues (Jaggar 1998, 2001). Further, many use “transnational feminism” and “global feminism” interchangeably (Moghadam 2005; Hawkesworth 2006; Ferree and Tripp 2006). These later global feminists, however, are much more sensitive to the conditions of “postmodernity” and the “multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions” of third world women (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, p. 17). In the remainder of this essay, “global feminism,” unless otherwise stated, refers to this later version.

The term “third world feminism,” which has tighter connections to local, national, and regional women’s activisms, seems to have lost its cachet since the mid-1990s, while “transnational feminism” has gained prominence among third world feminists. Third world feminists, including

Mohanty, whose earlier works popularized the term, now seem to prefer characterizing their feminisms as “transnational” (e.g., Alexander and Mohanty 1997, p.xx, p.xxix; Mohanty 2002, p. 509, p. 530). This is due to the increasing power of neoliberal global capitalism and urgency for feminists to resist its deleterious effects on third world women by forming transnational feminist networks (TFNs) (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Moghadam 2005). Although some transnational feminists have produced nuanced analyses of third world women’s relation to nation-states and nationalism (e.g., Basarudin, Chowdry, Jad, Jamal), key transnational feminists consider nation-states and nationalism as devoid of feminist utility (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, p.22; Kaplan et al. 1999, pp. 12–13).

## **MAIN COMMON CHARACTERISTICS**

### **Third World Women’s Epistemic Privilege**

One of the major premises of third world, transnational, and global feminisms is the ability of disenfranchised third world women to be not only agents of feminist changes but also the locus of a more objective knowledge for understanding social reality, whether locally or globally. Before the advent of third world, transnational, and global feminisms, disenfranchised third world women had been considered helpless victims, suffering from “false-consciousness” (Okin 1995, p. 5), whose voices are unreliable. Yet, in line with the feminist standpoint theory, third world, transnational, and global feminists consider third world women’s “marginalized” social locations as especially propitious for producing “less partial and distorted” or even “objective” understanding of the human condition (Harding 1993, pp. 56, 62). Their marginalized status enables them to have “epistemic privilege” and to be aware of events and conditions about which more privileged groups are either oblivious or dismissive. In particular, “within a tightly

integrated capitalist system, the particular standpoint of poor indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power” (Mohanty 2002, p. 511). Also, contrary to the prevalent stereotype of third world women as victims, these feminisms recognize that third world women have been actively resisting oppression in various local contexts (Basu 2010; Jayawardena 1986; Ong 2010; Pardo 2001; Shiva 1993).

### **Multiple and Intersecting Oppressions of Third World Women**

Second-wave white feminists universalized gender oppression based on experiences of middle-class white women in the West and argued that the aim of the earlier version of global feminism is to end the “common condition” of women worldwide based on their “shared biology”: patriarchy. Third world and transnational feminists have pointed out that this brand of universalism is “ahistorical” (Mohanty 1991a, p. 64) and “essentializing” (Kaplan et al. 1999, p. 13), “predicated on the erasure of the history and effects of contemporary imperialism” (Mohanty 1987, p. 34). These feminists argue that the correct way to theorize about third world women is to formulate “autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (Mohanty 1991a, p. 51). In particular, third world and transnational feminists must examine and analyze historically situated intersections of gender, race, class, and nation in creating particular forms of women’s oppression in different parts of the world (Mohanty 1991b, pp. 2–3). They then must “compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than ... construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, pp. 17–18). This, however, is not to reject “the universal.” The feminist goal is to “expand the commonality and solidarity” of women’s struggle. The reason why feminists must be knowledgeable about “differences and



particularities” is to “better see the connections and commonalities” and “to theorize universal concerns more fully” (Mohanty 2002, p. 505).

### **Critique of Global Capitalism**

A third characteristic of these feminisms is their shared focus on the deleterious effects of neoliberal global capitalism on women, especially third world women. The perspective adopted by these feminists in their analyses of global capitalism is “anticapitalist” (Mohanty 2002), and their dominant paradigm is “socialist-feminism” (Moghadam 2005, p. 103). The global expansion of neoliberal capitalism, also known as *globalization*, refers to an increasing integration of the world economy through deregulation in trade and finance, fueled by more developed countries of the North and their multinational corporations and aided by international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These feminists point out that globalization is “gendered,” entailing the disproportionate exploitation of women: It has generated (1) the increased participation of women in low-paying and insecure jobs—“the feminization of labor”; (2) a disproportionate percentage of poor women from the South migrating to better-developed parts of the world in search of jobs—“the feminization of migration”; and (3) the firings or layoffs of disproportionate numbers of women through “privatization” (Hawkesworth 2006, chap. 1).

### **Transnational Feminist Solidarity**

A fourth commonality among these feminisms is their promotion of “a noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders” (Mohanty 2002, p. 503). Neoliberal global capitalism’s

disproportionately negative impact on third world women has made this solidarity not only timely but also necessary. According to Moghadam, the achievement of such solidarity seems increasingly likely: Prior to the early 1980s, white global feminists had emphasized “equality and sexuality issues,” and third world feminists had emphasized “economic and political issues” (2005, p. 6). Such disagreements were overcome as white feminists began to understand the antifeminist consequences of the “transition from Keynesian to neoliberal economics” (p. 6), both domestically and globally. Further, “the emergence of various forms of fundamentalist movements” (p. 6) made third world feminists gravitate toward issues of equality and sexuality. Consequently, feminists from both the West and the third world adopted in the 1990s “a broader feminist agenda” that included both “a critique of neoliberalism and structural adjustment policies” and “an insistence on women’s reproductive rights, bodily integrity, and autonomy” that brought the two camps closer (p. 9).

### **SOME TRANSNATIONAL AND THIRD WORLD FEMINIST ACTIVITIES**

Several TFNs have mobilized not only to bring attention to and mitigate the negative impact of neoliberal global capitalism on third world women but also to construct an alternative vision of the global economy that is conducive to women all over the world. Prime examples include Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), which originated in India in 1984 and has an explicit focus on third world women’s economic situation, and Woman’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), which focuses on “environmental health and bio-safety” and includes among its leaders the Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva. These groups have sometimes worked separately and at other times formed coalitions in United Nations

conferences in order to promote the common goal of resisting the neoliberal global economy and empowering third world women (Moghadam 2005, chap. 5).

Another kind of TFN focuses on “patriarchal nationalisms and fundamentalist movements” (Moghadam 2005, p. 143). Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) is a prime example. WLUML was formed “in response to concerns about changes in family laws” (p. 144) in certain Muslim countries from which its founding members came, such as Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, and India. It operates by giving “priority to creating strong networks and ties of solidarity among women across countries” (p. 147).

Last but not least, there are active “women’s movements” in particular localities concerned more with “practical interests” that emerge from their “immediate and perceived needs” rather than with gender equality (Basu 2010, p. 4). These movements pursue their goals within their particular national and local contexts, sometimes in collaboration and at other times in contestation with their male national counterparts. There is a tendency among feminists to view women’s movements as distinct from “feminist” movements that explicitly focus on issues of gender equality (Basu 1995, p. 6; see also Basu 2010, p. 4). However, these women’s movements ought to be understood broadly as *feminist* movements, and the term third world feminism ought to be reserved for such movements, as distinct from transnational feminism.

## **GOING FORWARD**

TFNs have been quite successful in forming global feminist solidarity and coalitions on some key issues. According to Moghadam, TFNs eschew “nationalisms in favor of solidarity beyond

borders” (2005, p. 89), and transnational feminists’ “discourses and objectives are not particularistic but universalistic” (p. 102). However, transnational feminists must be careful not to reenact the all-encompassing universalist tendencies of earlier global feminists. After all, the resistance toward such universalism brought about the emergence of third world and transnational feminisms in the first place. This is not to say that universality should be rejected wholesale. There may be “universal concerns” that all women share (Mohanty 2002, p. 505).

Yet “the universal” has to be carefully teased out from historically grounded comparisons of particular conditions and activisms of third world women at the local and national levels. Otherwise, the universal would become empty at best in its fictitious generality or pernicious at worst as it blinds feminists to the real conditions of women on the ground. If, as Amrita Basu points out, local feminisms “cannot escape the state” and have been “overwhelmingly directed at the state” (2010, pp. 13, 14), then nation-states also cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to feminism. Indeed, in light of the fact that nation-states are the main arenas of contestation for democratic inclusion, local feminists must reclaim them as their own and actively engage with their conationals (Herr 2003, pp. 147–151). I believe that the analyses and advocacy of feminist activisms at the local and national levels comprise third world feminisms proper. The future of feminism relevant to third world women, therefore, must maintain a delicate balance between third world feminisms and transnational feminisms, thereby consolidating global feminist solidarity without losing sight of local and national women’s activisms.

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