

## Review Article<sup>1</sup>

# *Articulating Feminist Causes and Democratic Futures in Western and Third World Feminism*

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FOR FEMINIST STUDIES, the conflicts between Western and Third World feminisms have been an important area of critical inquiry. Critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have emphasized close, local, and historicized investigations of Third World women's experiences in order that Western feminist visions are not privileged. And yet, there remains a call from many critics for a universalized approach to feminism that will not only highlight the contextual differences but will also allow for a shared feminist vision that could cross national boundaries, a democratic feminist cause. Moreover, another important area of study in feminist criticism is the link between anticolonial movements with feminist movements. Often, feminists worked hand-in-hand with nationalists during anti-colonial struggles; after independence, however, feminism was often rejected by the postcolonial state because it was seen as a Western export—inappropriate in Third World settings. The questions raised by these debates are complex: What is the relationship between feminism and nationalism? Is there the possibility of an alliance between Third World feminists and Western feminists? What role can feminism play in disrupting the patriarchal practices of both the colonial and postcolonial state?

Both Kumari Jayawardena's text, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, and M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's anthology, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, focus their analyses on these questions. Each text, however, approaches these subjects from radically different perspectives. Jayawardena focuses on Western women in colonial South Asia

and their relationships with nationalist and feminist causes, and Alexander and Mohanty focus on Third World feminist struggles to form a democratic future in the face of colonial legacies, patriarchal postcolonial governments, and myopic Western feminist criticism. Despite their separate emphases, each text reveals that Third World feminists have had to fight numerous systems, including an imperial Western feminism and a patriarchal nationalism. While fighting these two systems, Third World feminists have attempted to forge connections with Western feminists and to define revolutionary ways to combat the legacy of colonial patriarchy in nationalist causes and in the postcolonial state.

Furthermore, in reading these texts, one is reminded of the continued importance to current feminist discourse of locational or positioning politics. Problematizing postmodernism's rejection of essentialism, Jayawardena, Alexander, and Mohanty reconsider the concept of location, showing through their specific critiques that the place one comes from and the position from which one attempts to speak remain important areas of critical investigation.

### I Western Feminist Causes: Engaging with Colonialism and Nationalism

Jayawardena's text is a solid addition to the research on Western women in South Asia. Current feminist criticism has added a multi-vocal analysis of the lives and writings of Western women in empire, helping to complicate and contextualize the earlier emphasis on the racist memsahib or the spirited, independent traveler. As the intellectual debate expands, the complexity of the problems inherent in analyzing such lives becomes more evident. What Jayawardena adds to this conversation is an emphasis on how diverse feminist agendas, including missionary practices, education and social "reform" work, spiritualist and religious devotion, and political activism, came in contact with the nationalist agendas of South Asia. Jayawardena titles her text *The White Woman's Other Burden*, echoing, of course, Kipling's poem but, more importantly, positioning herself in conversation with current research on Western women in empire, particularly drawing attention to Antoinette Burton's use of the phrase "The

White Woman's Burden," which highlights Western feminism's complicity with the imperial project. In her text, Jayawardena also raises issues of complicity and further emphasizes that gender complicates that complicity. More important, however, she likens the concept of "burden" to the social and religious causes that brought Western women to India: "Hence the sense of the 'white woman's other burden'—which was an attempt to liberate women, in terms of a Western or Eastern ideal, and in terms of a vision of a better society" (8).

A complication of Western feminist practices during colonialism is central to Jayawardena's text, asking "what are the basic issues of feminism and nationalism in a context of foreign women in a colonial situation—with agendas of conversion, modernization, reform and revolution?" (10). Jayawardena concludes that often the Western women who were strong supporters of nationalism were "lukewarm on women's rights for fear of offending locals; and those who were all for the sun never setting on the British Empire, were often 'advanced' on the issue of women's oppression and did not care too much about offending South Asian males or their own patriarchs" (10). As Jayawardena explains, the question revolves around issues of positioning: Who is speaking, from what ideological position, and with what political and social agenda? Can outsiders critique the culture? And what are the dangers of an outsider's critique?

Jayawardena's analysis turns also to the manner in which Western women's causes agitated the homosocial battle between British male colonialists and Asian male nationalists over the landscape of India. British male responses to the Western women depended upon the women's allegiance to colonialism, all having the potential to embarrass the colonial rulers, but some more fearfully than others (x). The worst women, for the colonialists, were those who "traitorously" rejected the moral duty of imperialism and embraced South Asian nationalisms, for they not only rejected empire but also British men (119). Asian nationalist males "who visited Britain were delighted to link up with the 'enemy within'—namely the 'new women' who were battling the authorities at all levels" (6). However, it is the conflicted response of Asian male nationalists to Western women's causes that seizes

Jayawardena's greatest attention. Western women's allegiance to South Asian nationalism defined their worth in many Asian male circles. Often, too-strong an identification with feminist agendas, agendas that might criticize religion and culture, was seen as an "attack on the 'nation'" (7). Moreover, Jayawardena argues that an attack on Indian male interpretations of the female role was particularly offensive when it came from Western women (7). This masculinist sense of feminism as a dangerous Western export and therefore inappropriate to South Asian society is, as Alexander and Mohanty note in their anthology, a brick wall that contemporary Third World feminists continue to struggle against.

Jayawardena divides her text into five parts, each detailing the lives of Western women in India and their relationship with feminism and nationalism. I would like to spend a few moments looking at two sections, one on missionary work and the second on theology, to exhibit how Jayawardena's thesis works in practice. In Part I, "Saving the Sisters from the Sacred Cows: Christianity and 'Civilization'," Jayawardena explores the relationship among foreign, Christian missionary work, feminism, and nationalism. For Jayawardena, the key question is "whether there was feminist consciousness in the missionary project" (25). Many current feminist critics, including Barbara Ramusack, argue that missionary education and emancipatory work for Asian women often served as a form of "imperial feminism," strengthening Western women's and empire's control of "saving" and enlightening "lesser sisters." However, Jayawardena also argues that Christianity served as a form of positive "sisterhood" (30), relying on Jane Rendall's arguments that church provided a way for women to associate with other women and to assert a "moral strength" against a "specifically male morality" (30). Indeed, Western women imperialists operated under complex systems of hierarchical thought, often arguing against the concept of caste because of Christianity but asserting the notions of race as a part of preserving the imperialist agenda. Jayawardena, however, argues that the narrow missionary objective of conversion also developed into the feminization of Christianity, through, for instance, providing education for women. She contends that

Christian missionaries' most enduring "contribution was the unintentional creation of a 'feminist' consciousness in local women through modern schools, which imparted a liberal education" (26), producing its "share of dissident women—nationalists, Socialists, feminists and human rights activists" (51).

Jayawardena shows the full complexity of the interrelationships among Christianity, feminism, Asian women, and nationalism in her exploration of the life of Pandita Ramabai. Ramabai, the daughter of a Sanskrit scholar, spoke out on "women's education, condemning child marriage" and later converted to Christianity during a period of Hindu revivalism (54-55). What becomes particularly important to Jayawardena's agenda is how Ramabai's Christianity and feminism come up against nationalism. Christians in India and abroad strongly held to the belief that reform and British rule were necessarily interlinked; the end of British rule "was seen as reversion to conflict, ignorance and superstition" (58). Ramabai's rejection of Hindu nationalism emerged because of what she saw as the hypocrisy of reformers, who were continuing to practice child marriage, for instance, even while they were campaigning against the practice (55). Strikingly, Ramabai argued that a foreign ruler was preferred over self-government, contending that because Britain was an older, Christian nation, one that had undergone its "Christian training" for centuries, it was better equipped to bring India "up to the mark" (59). Jayawardena concludes that Ramabai may have harmed the women's movement—showing the ways in which the foreign applications of feminism and Christianity gave traditionalists an avenue to argue against female education lest these women also turn to the side of the imperialist. Moreover, her engagement with British imperialism limited her ability to serve as a voice for colonial emancipation and feminist reform; rather, she replaced one patriarchal religious system with another, all for the sake of the emancipation of women (62).

In Part III, "Consolation in an Alien Society": Women Theosophists and Orientalists," Jayawardena reveals a contrasting response to Ramabai's dubious intermingling of Christianity, feminism and nationalism. This pairing and contrasting works well throughout *The White Women's Other Burden*, revealing

the controversies that take shape when Western feminist agendas take precedence over nationalist agendas (or vice versa). Western women theosophists and Orientalists, in contrast with Ramabai, turned to the East for salvation, arguing that the West was destroying a better, alternative society. However, Jayawardena points out the striking irony of the Theosophist movement; in "their anxiety to promote local culture and traditions, some of these women questioned the benefits of the modernizing process the missionaries had begun, especially in the education of women" (108).

Thus, a different relationship among religion, feminism, and nationalism emerged, one in which nationalism and Eastern religion took precedence over feminist reform. As Jayawardena notes, the most striking irony comes in the fact that theosophists, such as Blavatsky and Besant, although strong advocates of women's rights in Britain, "deemed it tactically prudent not to press too much for women's rights or women's education" (122). Besant employed the strategy of limiting her feminism to a geographical region: "She used the argument of cultural relativism and asserted that Western models were unsuitable for India. Limiting her feminism to the West, she advocated orthodoxy and traditional education for Indian women" (123). Thus she practiced a confused and dangerous form of liberalism rooted in a romanticism of the East. Like Ramabai, the Western theosophists replaced a Christian patriarchal system with a Hindu patriarchal system." Jayawardena concludes, "From the local women's point of view, the foreign women's idealization of Indian patriarchy was harmful, while to traditional Hindu males, it was a godsend" (134).

These careful analyses of Western women's responses to the confused matrix of nationalism, feminism, and their specific "cause"—be it Christianity, Theosophy, or Communism—make Jayawardena's text a very important addition to feminist criticism. A particular strength of the text is Jayawardena's careful positioning of each of the figures she reads, focusing on how ideological positions can radically alter the effectiveness of one's cause. For instance, missionary advocacy of female education within a colonial regime becomes difficult to swallow, as does

theosophist protection of elitist values in the name of nationalism. What emerges from these various viewpoints of Western women's causes is a complex matrix of relationships among feminism and nationalism, Western men and women, and Asian men and women.

Throughout her text, Jayawardena places special emphasis on how male nationalists and colonialists read the causes of Western women; however, she also touches on Asian women's responses to Western women's causes, underscoring the double bind many Asian feminists suffered within as they attempted to articulate a feminist *and* a nationalist agenda. Jayawardena roots her argument in a critique of gendered differences in empire—the othering of Indian women who were placed in contrast to chaste white women, the use of the metaphor of women to define the colonial project, clichés of the erotic and the exotic, and potent miscegenation fears. She not only maps out the problems with these issues when looking at them from the colonial period but also from the vantage point of late-twentieth century Western feminism. For instance, in her introduction, Jayawardena discusses how current feminist discussions of sisterhood are “misleading unless contextualized” (11). Moreover, she argues that nationalism must be similarly contextualized where it marshals feminist support during the nationalist fight and rejects feminism (as a Western export) once independence is achieved.

What is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the text is that Asian women's roles within this matrix are not always fully critiqued because male nationalists' and colonialists' responses tend to eclipse them. This problem may also arise because Jayawardena sometimes tends to be a bit too kind to the Western women she focuses on. While she effectively pinpoints the problem of missionary racism and the rejection of feminism by theosophists, for instance, she relegates to a very short concluding chapter the Asian feminist critique of Western women's causes. Within that conclusion, however, Jayawardena provides some of the most biting and focused criticisms of Western women's roles as agents of empire or nationalism. A more sustained integration of Asian feminist responses would have strengthened her argument. Jayawardena draws special attention to this lack in her

conclusion by calling for more writing on this subject: "One key question that remains to be discussed and researched further is how did local women react to foreign women claiming to be 'sisters'?" (265) While only briefly touching on this subject, she does provide many avenues for further investigation.

## II Democratic Futures: Responding to Feminist Genealogies and Colonial Legacies

Alexander and Mohanty begin their anthology, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, with a sense of mission, service, and "accountability" to the communities one belongs to and, borrowing a term from Toni Morrison, to the "intellectual neighbors" one builds (ix). They thereby affirm the reciprocal relationship between intellectual discourse and activism. The three over-arching concepts posed in the title are contextualized in Alexander and Mohanty's introduction, leading to an evaluation of the relationships between the colonial and postcolonial state, capitalism and re-colonization, and feminism and democracy. The writing of the text is very theoretical; however, it is well worth the reader's time to work through the concepts posed by Alexander and Mohanty and to examine these concepts in application within the three subsections of the text.

The first concept, "feminist genealogies," is a deeply complicated term that "aims to provide a comparative, relational, and historically based conception of feminism, one that differs markedly from the liberal-pluralist understanding of feminism, an inheritance of the predominantly liberal roots of American feminist praxis" (xvi). Indeed, one hears echoes of Mohanty's and many others' previous work on decentring First World, Western feminist definitions of Third World feminism and their call for a close, localized and historically-rooted criticism, a point I called attention to at the beginning of this essay. This conversation remains important; however, what this anthology adds to the discussion is a merging of the local with the cross-national. Alexander and Mohanty argue for "shifting the unit of analysis from local, regional, and national culture to relations and processes across cultures. Grounding analysis in particular, local feminist praxis is necessary, but we also need to understand



the local in relation to larger, cross-national processes" (xix). This approach contrasts with the Western feminist concept of global feminism, which begins with a universal vision that is defined in Western terms and then reads Third World women's specific histories through that Western feminist lens. In contrast, Alexander and Mohanty begin with the localized experience and move outwards to a universalized language, a reading strategy that does not center Western feminism. Their argument grows out of their carefully reasoned critiques of, for instance, the tokenism practiced in many Women's Studies programs in US colleges and universities, the shortsightedness of postmodernism and "global sisterhood," and, most importantly, an examination of the workings of feminist organizations.

Like "feminist genealogies," "colonial legacies" is a similarly complex term that Alexander and Mohanty use "to map continuities and discontinuities between contemporary and inherited practices within state and capital formations" (xxi). Here, Alexander and Mohanty are interested in pointing out the complicity between colonial and postcolonial states; in this sense, capitalism serves as a form of recolonization that postcolonial states are complicit with. Moreover, the state continues this complicity through controlling Third World feminism. Although, Alexander and Mohanty argue, women's labor was at the heart of nationalist struggles, anticolonial nationalism has failed to respond effectively to gender (xxiv). The impact of colonial legacies on the postcolonial state is particularly evident, for Alexander and Mohanty, in the state's use of organized violence, its militarization and masculinization, its invention of a racialized and sexualized population, and its manipulation of women's bodies in order "to consolidate patriarchal and colonizing processes" (xxiii).

Geraldine Heng's essay, "'A Great Way to Fly': Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism," presents the concepts of "feminist genealogies" and "colonial legacies" in practice. She argues that feminism served nationalist struggles by providing those struggles with powerful feminine symbols and an emancipatory vision of the future: "Female emancipation—a powerful political symbol describing at once a separation from

the past, the aspirations of an activist present, and the utopia of an imagined national future—supplies a mechanism of self-description and self-projection of incalculably more than pragmatic value in the self-fashioning of nations and nationalisms (31). However, after independence, women, who were once vaunted as symbols of emancipation, were exploited by the post-colonial states through sexualized images of them in the airline industry, through a GNP bolstered by the tourist trade in prostitution and through exploitation of female domestic workers (32).

In her argument, Heng underscores the ways in which capitalism as a colonialist legacy and a form of recolonization has encroached upon Third World economies that are far too often complicit with the exploitation. Moreover, she argues that Third World nations have been selective in their appropriation of “modernism,” accepting the “technological and economic machinery of modernization” (33) because it is perceived as useful to the nation; however, postcolonial states often reject the “cultural apparatus of modernization,” which is perceived as “contaminating, dangerous, and undesirable” (33). Third World feminists have had to struggle against nationalists who argue that feminism is a Western assault upon nationalist culture. In order to remain viable, Third World feminists have had to adopt overtly nationalist agendas, placing them in an added double bind with Western feminists who incorrectly interpret the nationalism of Third World feminists as “willfully naive, nativist, or essentialist” (34).

When, as in Heng’s essay, the anthology reveals the striking ways in which internal and external patriarchal forces (and often that external patriarchal force is Western feminism) influence contemporary feminist practices, the text is at its strongest. When, however, arguments attempt to cover too broad a category of analysis, thus dismissing important aspects of analysis and positing a more ungrounded beginning for their argument, the text is at its weakest. Amina Mama’s “Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence against Women in Africa” is a particularly stark interpretation of violence against women in colonial and post colonial Africa. However,

unlike other more focused critiques of, for instance, the Bahamas tourist economy, Mama tries to cover a rather large variety of African cultures in order to read a shared practice of violence against women rooted in the "imperial source." Certainly, imperialism is the most powerful influence for exploitation of women in many cultures; however, other writers offer a less circumscribed understanding of exploitation, searching for multiple sources, both internal and external, and placing these sources in conversation with each other. Mama does write in her conclusion that "Colonial gender ideologies were the product of both internal and external factors, and were fed by cultural and material conditions which interacted in complex ways as we entered the postcolonial epoch. There is clearly a need for more detailed study of these developments in particular locales, even as we forge international links" (61). She thus cites probably the biggest failing of her essay, that in its attempt to cover such breadth, the precision that comes from reading a critique that moves from the localized to the universal is attenuated. I do, however, still recommend reading Mama's argument because her essay provides many opportunities for further criticism and her arguments, though broad, are often insightful and useful.

In this way, the contributors build a connection between feminist analysis and their critique of colonial/postcolonial state practices, resulting in Alexander and Mohanty's advancing of the concept of "feminist democracies," a direct and concrete response to the call for accountability and service with which they begin the anthology. They pose a decolonizing vision of democracy, one which must be anticolonial and anticapitalist. Moreover, women's agency is re-conceptualized, where women are not solely victims, but agents in the process of decolonization, and agents who are "anchored in the practice of thinking of oneself as a part of feminist collectives and organizations. This is not the liberal, pluralist individual self under capitalism" (xxviii). And they disband "the (often artificial) divide between feminism and scholarship. . . . It is the practice within movements that anchors the theory, the analysis is undertaken to improve the practice" (xxix).

This posing of "feminist democracies" is a groundbreaking contribution of the anthology. Thus, it stands to reason that the

most interesting and useful critique for current feminist discourses is provided in the final section, "Anatomies of Organizing, Building Feminist Futures." This section provides a series of case studies on organizations such as the Sistren Collective, Women in Nigeria, and Stree Shakti Sanghatana. What becomes particularly important when reading these case studies is not the organizational successes, and there are many highlighted, but the organizational failures. In painfully investigating these failures, the authors provide the means for re-examining feminist collective practices. These examples serve as rough drafts, drafts that clearly highlight how even those groups that are conscious of differences in economic class, political agenda and race might fail to examine thoroughly how these differences operate in practice; more importantly, scrutinizing these problems paves the way for more effective future organizing.

For instance, Honor Ford-Smith's deeply personal article, "Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: Sistren, Collective Democracy, and the Organization of Cultural Production," maps the organizational development of the Sistren Collective with Ford-Smith acting as the group's Artistic Director from its founding until she left in 1989. One key problem Ford-Smith pinpoints is the capitalist control of the language of development which in turn affects fund-raising initiatives. Because a primary goal of the Collective was "to create theater for and with working-class women" (217), funding agencies did not see the group as "income-generating" or "productive" (228). First World, and particularly US development agencies stress economic growth and modernization. Accents on art and culture do not fit within the capitalist agenda of producing new markets for the West and building dependence on Western technology (229).

This privileging of economics over culture is also evident in M. Jacqui Alexander's essay from an earlier section, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy." Alexander reveals that an economy driven by the Western tourist dollar and a state complicit with this practice creates a culture defined by its service to the First World rather than by its own sense of autonomy and development. This is most evident in the

“smile” campaigns and the Rotarian bumper stickers, “What have you done for Tourism today?” (92), where good citizens are those who contribute to capitalism rather than to an autonomy separate from capitalism. In reading these essays, one gets a clear sense of the difficulties inherent in an anticolonialist and anticapitalist feminist struggle, and the need for a maintained critique of the capitalist language in US development also is affirmed.

Other problems for the “democratic futures” are made evident in Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran’s essay, “Looking at Ourselves: The Women’s Movement in Hyderabad,” which traces the development of Stree Shakti Sanghatana (SSS), this time looking at how the group began to privilege reflective activities over activism and to separate the two from each other. Having worked on vegetable exports, women’s hostels, rape, and dowry issues, SSS formed a growing awareness that “in spite of all this activity, [they were] not able to address the issues of working-class women in a manner that made it possible for them to move from participating equally in the campaigns into participating equally in the functioning of the group” (273). The group shifted its focus from activism to research, alienating one from the other due to significant differences in educational background, economic class differences, urban versus rural locations, and academic feminist control of resources (276). This movement from activism “rooted in a Third-World revolutionary praxis—to activism bound to another context—intellectual discourse in the West” created a fissure for the group and eventually led to its dissolution (277). These essays emphasize how Western values (Western foreign aid practices, capitalism’s role in Third World economies, and the artificial separation of research from activism) insidiously work their way into Third World feminist organizations. But, more important, they provide the means for rethinking and restructuring anticolonial and anticapitalist feminist collectives.

In critiquing feminist causes—one through the vantage point of Western feminism in colonial India and the other through Third World feminism and the postcolonial state—both texts offer complex and important analyses of the problems facing

feminist causes. They reveal how causes that are not heavily contextualized—as in the case of many Western women in colonial India—ignore the complex relationship between feminism and nationalism, and do more to harm both feminism and nationalism than to help. Moreover, these texts reveal, as in the case of women's collectives, ways in which contemporary organizations have had tremendous success, but they still have many lessons to learn about advocacy and connection across gender, ethnic, and political ideological borders.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Pp. xlii, 422. \$69.95, \$22.95 pb. And Kumari Jayawardena. *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. x, 310. \$62.95, \$20.99 pb.