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978-0-521-58030-4 - Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World

Chilla Bulbeck

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INTRODUCTION



JUSTIFYING THE DIVIDE

You are facing the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Walk round its walls until you come to a brass strip set in the pavement. The smooth, gold band in the ground marks the Prime Meridian, or Longitude Zero ... Stand to the left-hand side of the brass strip and you are in the Western hemisphere. But move a yard to your right, and you enter the East: whoever you are, you have been translated from a European into an Oriental.

– Young 1995:1

'Learn her mother-tongue' if you wish to feel solidarity, suggests Gayatri Spivak. Learn about the other woman, not as the stereotype we see in the popular media, either oppressed by foreign customs or as the exotic other, clad in colourful difference. From documentaries and news stories, from advertisements and pleas by aid agencies, western women are bombarded with images of 'other' women. Often these stereotypes are contradictory: the strong black matriarch exposed to domestic battery; the veiled Iranian who took up a gun to fight for her country's independence; the passive mail-order bride who is nevertheless a scheming gold-digger; the proud erect image of Winnie Mandela in her traditional headdress but convicted of corruption. But the purpose of this book is not primarily to learn about the other woman. This book will fail to deliver the rich detail of women's lives offered in anthropology courses or area studies (like Asian studies). Rather, we will explore why and how the stereotypes of 'other' women are so integral to white western women's constructions of themselves. Contradictory or not, these stereotypes are usually pejorative. Why? What is their purpose in the construction of 'white westernness'?

As Margaret Jolly (1996:185, 169) suggests, our focus on unfamiliar forms of feminism, like anthropology's focus on unfamiliar cultures, will help us challenge and change the familiar forms of feminism we find in women's studies subjects and our daily lives. This is the meaning of the

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play on re-orienting and oriental in this book's title: that we will be viewing western feminism through the eyes of women from the so-called 'third world' (the 'south', the 'east'), asking how women of the 'first world' (the 'north', the 'west') appear through the eyes of others. The unfamiliar allows us to question our understandings of the familiar, for example by comparing infibulation and breast implants. In this sense, the book's purpose departs from that of an anthropological text, for example. The focus is not on understanding how other women live as a project in itself, but on those aspects of other women's lives which challenge western feminism's theoretical and empirical preoccupations. Although we will be exploring research which describes how women live in different cultures, the project is not only about 'them' but also about 'us', how we can see ourselves differently by comparing our taken-for-granted feminist precepts with the writing by women from beyond the Anglophone west. Thus we will use the image of the other to make our familiar faces look strange, to offer new interpretations. As we step into other cultures, we perforce carry our own preoccupations with us. Thus this book carries western feminism's issues and the English language across the borders into other cultures. But it also seeks to carry back across the frontier a cargo that will ask new questions of western feminism: questions that will both challenge the 'imaginative spaces that non-western people occupy' in western minds (Lutz and Collins 1993:2) and the imaginative spaces that 'we' occupy in our own minds. So remember who is taking you on this journey, and why. For those who desire other routes, there are signposts, references to other writers, which I hope offer myriad personal journeys through the literature.

It is the book's project which justifies the juxtaposition suggested in the title of this book: a tiny fragment of the world and its knowledge, 'western feminisms', is arraigned against 'oriental' and 'post-colonial' feminisms and women's writing. This is a book written for white western women, a text which challenges the understandings of ourselves we gain from feminist texts written by and for white western women. In this book western feminisms will usually refer to the work of North American, Australasian and European-descended feminists. Within the west, both indigenous women and diaspora women from Asian and other so-called third world countries have conducted a critique of the 'whiteness' of western feminism. These women often produce writing from the borderlands, work which reflects their home in two cultures. Thus a division, as apparently arbitrary as the Prime Meridian in Greenwich, separates the west from the rest in this book, the self from the other. However, like the Prime Meridian itself, the fault line of this book is born of the history of colonialism, the economics of imperialism, the linguistics of English-language dominance in much of the feminist world, and the pressures of western cultural forms on the lives and psyches of those in the so-called

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third world. The Greenwich Meridian is not only a geographical convenience; it is no accident that it is in London, at the centre of a former imperial power and maritime nation. In the park below the Old Royal Observatory, among those descended from the 'Angles, Celts, Danes' are a 'varied mingling of peoples, whose ancestors hark back to the Caribbean and Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Tibet, Afghanistan' (Young 1995:2). This mingling of Londoners is also an outcome of British colonialism; most have migrated from erstwhile colonies. Thus east and west continue to have a real salience, both in our imaginations and in the world of economics and politics.

Nevertheless, the centre from which this text proceeds may seem both odd and tediously familiar to many writers and readers from beyond the white west. They see feminism, as far as they deem it relevant, from a centre which is in India or China, or indigenous communities in Canada or Australia. However overwhelmed by western cultural imperialism, many cultures also construct themselves as a centre of epistemological geography, the space from which they know the world. In Chinese views of the world, there were Han Chinese people and there were barbarians or 'foreign devils'; walls were built to keep the latter out. The characters for China are translated as Middle Kingdom, the centre of the world. Before the twentieth century, outside influences were refused because other cultures were found to be inferior in technology and grace; after Liberation the west was found to be inferior in politics and morality. Chinese language uses the oppositions *wai guo ren* and *Zhong guo ren*, literally 'outside country people' and 'central country people', while 'foreign devil' is even used by Chinese people recently arrived in Australia to describe Australians: 'Using a term like "foreign devil" is 'akin to calling a Chinese person a Chinaman or Chink' (Ye Sang 1996:viii). Although 'foreign experts' may be treated with respect and deference by their junior colleagues and students, foreigners are also 'regarded with contempt', 'loaded with money', 'lazy, weak, and stupid' (Jacka 1994:670). Hindi also has a term for foreigner *firangi* or *firinghee*, which 'implies something of hostility or disparagement'; those who cannot speak Arabic correctly are referred to as *ajami*, foreigners to the faith (Peter Mayer pers. comm.; Mernissi 1993:22). Thus a book by a Chinese or Hindu woman about feminisms around the world would write from another centre; it would not seek or see the same differences as this text explores.

Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, one could claim that there are as many centres as there are women. In a sense there are. But political and theoretical pressures accord particular salience to some differences, for example identities based on class, race/ethnicity, sexuality and, more recently, age. The emerging interest in whiteness and westernness has been produced by political and ideological pressure from women for whom race has long been salient. White western feminists are now

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beginning to see themselves as particularised in terms of their ethnicity or culture through a growing interest in 'other' women. Even so, within women's studies courses, 'other' women still often appear as just that, as footnotes of difference on the general themes of white women's lives and experiences. At the same time, women's studies does not and cannot (in my opinion, although this is contested by some postmodernists) dissolve into endless differences. Patterns must be sought, lines of distinction drawn, or nothing much can be said. This book charts the minefield between the overwhelming minutiae and the unacceptable homogenisation of women's experiences.

Thus the fault line of this book does repress real differences within both west and east as well as the 'mingling' of east in west and west in east. To some extent this grand opposition will be avoided by using other distinctions like religion (particularly Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, Buddhism), nationality (Chinese women, Indian women, Filipinas), class background and geographical location (professional women in the city, peasant women in the country). Clearly these divisions cut across each other, further exposing the false homogenisation of east, or Indian or even women living in New Delhi. Nevertheless, without a book like this, many women's studies students will continue to study English-language western feminisms as though they are (almost) the only feminisms, as though they speak unequivocally for all women. I hope that this book will stretch western feminism out from its eurocentrism towards its borderlands, towards its intersections with women of other cultures. In the process we will see how the lives of some non-Anglo women are differently lived, or at least differently represented. These representations and lives exist not only beyond the countries of the 'west' but also within them, in the women who have come from India or South America as migrants, or indigenous women who lived here before English colonisation.

The title of this book uses the term 'western feminisms', although the brand of feminism under challenge from the borderlands might also be called 'Anglo feminism', or feminism produced by English-speaking 'white' women. To some extent the terms 'Anglo' and 'western' will be used interchangeably. Not all western feminisms are English-language-based, however, and there are differences between the theories and practices of feminism in different western countries. For example, Gisela Kaplan (1992:xxi) examines the heterogeneity of the west in her analysis of twenty western European countries' feminist movements, collecting these countries into four groups: the Scandinavian progressive north, the conservative centre, the creative traditionalism of western Europe (France and the Netherlands), radical southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal). English-language feminism, rather than European feminism, has dominated international feminism, while in each country national

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language archives were supplemented by the ubiquitous holdings of *The Second Sex*, *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Female Eunuch*, *The Dialectics of Sex*, *Sexual Politics* (Kaplan 1992:xxiii–xxiv). The return cultural traffic is more limited. With the exception of ‘heavy imports’ from France and Germany, European feminism has had little influence on ‘big-time feminist theory’ (Holub 1994:239).

Even the term ‘Anglofeminism’, which would exclude much European feminism, also represses national differences: the individualistic, legal rights-oriented and academically nurtured feminism of the United States, the welfare-oriented and trade union-connected feminism of Britain, the femocratic or bureaucratically oriented feminism of the Antipodes (Australia and New Zealand) (Hewlett 1987:xviii; Eisenstein 1996). These internal differences struck me forcibly in April 1992, when I attended the ‘We Won’t Go Back’ (to illegal abortions) rally in Washington DC. In comparison with Australian women’s demonstrations, the rally was huge, attended by between 500 000 and 1 million people (*USA Today* 6 April 1992:1) who left a monumental debris of mass-produced signs wielded by the marchers. While marchers were reminded by speakers from non-Anglo backgrounds that abortions which resulted from poverty or forced sterilisations were just as much a matter of reproductive choice as the legalisation of abortions, the dominant refrain was rights and freedoms. Famous speakers, like Jill Eckenberry from *L.A. Law*, Jane Fonda the actor, Senate candidate Geraldine Ferraro reflected on this theme: ‘Choice is about freedom, and what is America without freedom?’

As a (perhaps wimpish) Australian, I was struck by the anger of many of the speakers and participants. A black and white women’s vocal group from Manhattan, named Betsy, shouted out the slogan ‘We are fierce, we are feminist, and we are in your face’. Robin Morgan urged us to buy T-shirts proclaiming ‘Rage plus women equals power’. One placard read ‘Abort Bush Before his Second Term’. Angry arguments erupted between the pro-choice women and the pro-life women who had erected a ‘cemetery of innocents’ nearby (representing aborted foetuses and the twenty-three women who had died during legal abortions). I went to the United States believing I knew it intimately from the flood of films, television programs and academic books that pervade Australian popular and intellectual culture. Yet I felt battered and cut adrift by the assertiveness and anger, by the incessant refrain of rights and freedoms. This fashion of feminism was unfamiliar to me (see Bulbeck 1994 for a fuller discussion).

Given its media representation, one might think I would find China more unfamiliar. Mainland China is well known for its one-child policy, a government edict that produces much anguish even among those who accept its necessity: ‘nobody thinks it is a perfect policy’ but we have to

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accept that 'it's the lesser of two evils' (Wang Jiaxiang, Beijing Foreign Studies University Women's Group Meeting, 10 December 1993). This terse acknowledgement of necessity is worlds apart from the discourse of rights and freedoms I heard American feminists endorse. Among Chinese feminists I expected to be less at home, to perforce work harder at cross-cultural communication. Yet in some ways their expressions of feminism resonated more with my desired image of Australian feminism. Instead of anger and individual freedoms, Chinese feminists in Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei stressed compromise and conciliation. Courtesy may have disguised their more forthright opinions of me and my culture, but exchange of ideas appeared more possible.¹

This brief comparison of the contours of western and Asian women's activism reveals that sometimes we find similarities where they are not expected. While some feminists today are preoccupied with difference as a retort to the universalising claims of categories like 'sisterhood', we are in danger of losing sight of the commonalities and connections between women. As Chapters 1 and 5 warn, however, women of the world are connected *both* through some shared language and ideas *and* in structures of unequal power. There is no pure west and east. People, goods, ideas and texts travel backwards and forwards across the borderlands. This text addresses constantly, though not always comfortably, the tension between commonality and difference. The topics and examples are chosen as areas where a difference between orient and west has been suggested. Our analyses will find that sometimes the differences are inappropriately constructed, or not as great as dichotomous oppositions suggest. Furthermore, we bring those contrasts back to reconceive western difference, rather than focusing our attention on the difference of the other.

In summary, we will seek to challenge the dualism or opposition between self and other in two directions, both by questioning the stereotypes which constitute those women defined as different to the 'self', and by using the words the other has written about white western feminism to ask new questions about ourselves. A key task for this text will be to hold the similarities and differences in view at once, to avoid resorting to either a simple dualism or a simple universalism. One way we will do this is through the notion of connections between women: connections of shared culture and politics as well as connections of economic inequality. These connections point to the claim that many of us are hybrid subjects, neither purely 'westerner' nor purely 'easterner' but a mixture of both: we are in the other but she is also in us, a part of what constitutes our understandings of ourselves and the world. 'Move a yard to your right' and you become an easterner.

But first a brief review of the western feminisms which inform this book.

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THE CHANGING NAME BRANDS OF FEMINISMS

Is difference good or bad, biological, social, or historical? Is it a weakness or a strength? Should we forfeit a notion of sexual difference on the grounds that all people, men and women, are not essentially different from each other, but merely culturally constructed as different? Can these constructions of masculinity and femininity be undone?

– Holub 1994:235

This section provides a cursory introduction to the present state of western feminist theorising. Focusing on another tension between similarity and difference (between male and female), we explore the transition from the tripartite classification of liberal-radical-socialist feminism to 'gynocentric' (Seidman 1994:241) and postmodernist feminist discourses. For those familiar with these changes in feminist theory, the last section of this Introduction provides an outline of the book.

Radical, Liberal and Socialist Feminism

Put baldly, radical feminists see women treated as much the same everywhere, and it is badly. There is an independent oppression based on sex, and it occurs across time and tides. As Catharine MacKinnon (1989:10) so aptly summarises it, 'bottom is bottom'. Radical feminism, as this perspective is usually termed, is an 'unmistakably twentieth century phenomenon' which takes 'the subordination of women as its central concern' (Alison Jaggar in Sandoval 1991:7). Radical feminism is also a brand of feminism particularly based in the United States. Through the term patriarchy, radical feminists paid particular attention to oppression based on sex and experienced as (female) bodily disadvantage. Their issues were women's reproductive freedom (for example the right to choose marriage partners and the number and spacing of children), women's bodily autonomy (incest, rape and physical violence towards women) and the representations of women as sexed and inferior (in pornography, advertising and prostitution).² Some radical feminists call for sexual, economic, social and/or political separatism from men. Along with other feminist perspectives, the influence of radical feminism can be seen in the discussion of motherhood in Chapter 3, pornography in Chapter 4 and the international traffic in women in Chapter 5.

Liberal feminism, its genesis often associated with Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), has dominated the politics of feminism in the anglophone west. Liberal feminism claims that the capacity to reason is 'part of the human essence', shared by both men and women (Jaggar 1983:37). Differences between the sexes are a result of sexist attitudes more than unequal social structures or real differences between men and

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women. Liberal feminists thus tend to accept existing economic and political structures and argue for equality of opportunity for women within them. Their policies focus on more women in paid work (for example affirmative action legislation) or in politics. In Australia, femocrats (feminists specifically appointed to government bureaucracies to improve the position of women) generally advocate liberal feminist policies. But attempts to create equality of opportunity have raised issues of sexual difference, for example how primary responsibility for childcare affects participation in the workforce, or how health and emotional disadvantage through exposure to domestic violence reduces women's capacity to perform in the public sphere. Thus liberal feminism has its radical edge. With its sometimes uncritical concentration on the importance of economic development and human rights, liberal feminism has contributed to the discussions of economic development, explored in Chapters 1 and 5, and international women's rights, explored in Chapter 2.

Marxist or socialist feminism asserts either the primacy of class oppression over gender oppression (marxist feminism) or the coexistence of both (socialist feminism) in explaining the subordination of women. While liberal feminists are more likely to believe that attitudinal change will improve the position of women, socialist feminists are dedicated to structural changes, including the abolition of capitalism, which will overcome the vast differences in the economic position between and among men and women. Where the United States has been the major location for theoretical work by radical feminists, Great Britain has a much stronger representation of socialist feminists. Socialist feminists adapted marxist concepts like mode of production (which explained how capitalists appropriated the labour power of workers) to develop notions like the 'domestic mode of production', which explained how husbands appropriated the labour of housewives without paying its full worth. Women's unpaid domestic labour, according to socialist feminists, also benefits capitalists, who can hire workers at lower wages than would otherwise be possible. Socialist feminism has contributed to the discussions of the history of colonialism (Chapter 1) and its contemporary expression in the global economy (Chapter 5).

In the late 1970s marxist feminists developed the above tripartite classification of feminism (also defined as liberal-democratic, radical-separatist and materialist-socialist in Emberley 1993:8). They criticised both liberal and radical feminism for neglecting the class dimension in women's oppression. This class dimension reveals both that working-class women are more exploited than middle-class women and that middle-class women sometimes themselves exploit or benefit from the exploitation of working-class women. Examples which this book will explore include western consumers purchasing commodities produced by low-paid female workers in the free-trade zones of Asia, and western, Hong

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Kong and Middle Eastern women hiring Thais and Filipinas as domestic workers. In the 'patriarchy debate' a number of writers sought to conciliate in the 'unhappy marriage between marxism and feminism' (Hartmann 1981; see also Eisenstein 1979). However, since marxist feminists saw class as the paramount form of oppression and radical feminists blamed patriarchy or sex-based oppression, even a marriage of equals was going to please neither side. One response to the patriarchy debate was Catharine MacKinnon's (1987) description of radical feminism as 'feminism unmodified', unmodified by any other -ism such as marxism or liberalism.

The Critique from Women of Colour

From the 1980s, resulting from a decade-long but different sheaf of critiques of feminism, it became unfashionable to divide feminism into this tripartite classification, although you will still find textbooks which do this (this one being no exception!). The first critique, and apparently the easiest to incorporate, came from socialist feminists of colour. If capitalism gave us the oppression of class, then colonialism and imperialism gave us the oppression of colour or race, class oppression written on a global map. This is expressed in the great economic differences in well-being between workers in the west and east or the use of guest labour, immigrants and domestic workers in the west in the lower reaches of the labour force. Indeed, race-based oppression has supplanted class-based oppression as the critique of universal sisterhood: 'class oppression' has become 'definitely *non grata* as a topic' (Barrett 1992:217).

The voices and changing preoccupations of socialist feminists of colour are captured in two edited collections by Miranda Davies: *Third World – Second Sex* vol. 1 (1983) and *Third World – Second Sex* vol. 2 (1987). In both, most writers were connected with socialist movements and saw marxism as the key theoretical tool, and imperialism or postcolonial economic exploitation as the key oppression. Between the first and second collections, however, greater attention was given to so-called 'radical feminist' issues like prostitution, domestic battery, sexual harassment, rape. From two articles by Indian writers in the first issue, the second issue carried seven articles, covering Thailand, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Iran and India (see Bulbeck 1991:80–1). Some women beyond the west now saw oppression as a 'constellation of 'international oppression, national and personal oppression' (Nawal el Sa'adawi, quoted in Beall et al. 1989:34), of sex, class and race oppression.

This notion of different aspects of oppression led to what Adrienne Rich (1984:289) called the 'fruitless game of "hierarchies of oppression": which of these characteristics created the *most* oppression? She was responding to the claim that "bourgeois feminists" are despicable

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creatures of privilege whose oppression is meaningless beside the oppression of black, Third World, or working-class women and men', thus clearly identifying her quarrel with marxist feminism. In reality, the prioritising of oppression depends on whether one is white or oppressed by one's colour, whether one is heterosexual or oppressed by one's sexuality, whether one is middle-class or oppressed by one's poverty. Thus female academics from Asian nations are sometimes attacked for not 'really' being subordinated: 'I was told I had used my power unfairly by posing as a marginal; that I could criticize the establishment only because I spoke its language too well' (Gayatri Spivak, quoted in Marcus 1990:15; see also Rey Chow, 1991b:98). One can be simultaneously disabled and enabled by the same signifier of status. Thus a woman's use of her married name 'makes graphic at the same time her subordination as a woman and her privilege as a presumptive heterosexual' (Sedgwick 1990:32–3). It is sometimes argued that 'the hierarchies of class, race, and gender are simultaneous and interlocking systems' (Eitzen and Zinn 1992:181).

The response of some radical feminists to the criticisms by women of colour was merely to incorporate non-white women under the umbrella of universal patriarchy, for example Robin Morgan's (1984) collection *Feminism is Global*. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1992:78–9) criticises such proposals for planetary feminism for assuming that women share a universal experience of oppression from which arises a shared goodwill towards all other women. Furthermore, such global surveys can 'unintentionally set up a hierarchy of "civilized" customs' (Sievers 1992:322), just as surveys like Mary Daly's (1978) attempt to align witch-burning, foot-binding and infibulation.

Sameness–Difference Feminism

We will return to the implications of this multiplication of women's positioning through its role in the postmodern critique explored below. But first, another aspect of the 1980s was a reconstruction of feminism as the minimalist and maximalist positions (Stimpson 1988), or more commonly the sameness–difference debate (MacKinnon 1987:32–45 in the United States and Carol Bacchi 1990 in Australia). The minimalists claimed that women should be seen through a prism which emphasised their similarities with men, while the maximalists believed in women's fundamental differences from men. The liberal and socialist feminists were now aligned under the banner of sameness. Sameness asserted that women, apart from minor physiological differences, were more or less the same as men and should have the same opportunities to participate in politics, paid labour or revolution. Radical feminists, however, focused on differences, but could now be seen as consisting of two strands.

In contrast with the 1970s, when difference was generally seen as the curse of oppression, some feminists now constructed women's difference