

IMPERIALISM AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION – A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST ENQUIRY

Gargi Mukherjee

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan - 731235

mantugargi@gmail.com

Introduction

A simple definition of imperialism is that it is a practice of domination, in which a foreign government administers a territory without significant settlement. The difficulty is to distinguish it from colonialism. Practice of colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin. Colonialism is one of the practices of imperial ideologies. Imperialism is a strategic form which is associated with capitalism. In that sense, we may safely say that imperialism provides the conceptual basis for the exploitation of the resources of the lands other than their own, whereas colonialism is a practical aspect of it. As they are the offshoot of capitalist ideology and strategy, imperialist ventures aim for profitable trade and enrichment of one's country by exploiting the natural resources and the low cost labour power of a foreign land. But imperialism is one of the ways in which colonialism operates. It is about capturing the foreign land also as market for Western goods. To exploit the natural resources and the low cost labour, imperialism operates on the nationalist and cultural constructs too. Specifically, on the socio-cultural realm, the imperial patriarchy aided and abetted the gender discrimination according to the contextual reality of the colonised nation.

Historically the oppression of women pre-dates to the development of class society. That oppression, in different forms, is still widespread in a world dominated by imperialism. Today, women are divided amongst different classes and different nationalities. The majority in the oppressed nations suffer both class and national oppression. All women in the oppressed nations are oppressed in one or other form of cultural nationalism. All women, wherever they are, suffer from male domination to varying degrees. Class exploitation and national oppression are products of imperialism, and they are hand in glove with other. Thus, women who suffer class exploitation and national oppression have the

need to overthrow imperialism in order to rid themselves of those two variants of exploitation and oppression.

It is clear that the very nature of capitalism and imperialism has perpetuated various forms of women's oppression by men and has created new forms of that oppression. It is also clear that although women played a significant role in various national liberation struggles and attempts at socialist revolution, and once those stages of struggle were successful, the women's issues were not taken up in a significant way. This seems to be a result of not fully grasping the particular nature of women's oppression, but just seeing it as a part of other struggles (national and class). Obviously, in the real world, areas of struggle will always have aspects of class, national and women's struggles. The emphasis will differ from struggle to struggle. However, postcolonial feminism tries to address the lacunae, by bringing various forms of oppressions together. Trying to intervene in the post-colonial reality, it tries to seek, particularly, how the formation of identity of women happens at the intersection of various contesting identities. This paper is an attempt to understand how postcolonial feminist studies attempt to understand the problems of gender discrimination with the tools offered by critical theories and post-Marxist discourses.

In the history of feminism, we find three waves of feminism. In the first wave of feminism, women were concerned about their legal rights such as, right to vote, right to get equal opportunity, right to job, right to motherhood and many such other issues. In the second wave of feminism, the concern was centred on sexuality. But the third wave of feminism has understood the problems in the earlier two phases of feminism that the economic undercurrents of the reasons for the suppression of women were identified. When the second wave of feminism gave importance to the body and the sexuality, it also offered the ground for the manipulation of the women's body and sexuality by the capitalist forces. In that way again women body got objectified as desirable objects of men's world such as fairer skin, colouring hair, nails, lipstick, etc. By this women are not only making themselves available to the masculine desires but in that way third world women are also falling into the trap of imitating of first world as the First world's notion of beauty won over the Third World women. By inheriting and repeating the Western notion of beauty culturally, bodily, and intellectually, the imperial designs of the West come to be inscribed on the body of the

Third World women. Hence, emancipation is akin to the bleaching of the body of the coloured women. In the same way, by way of imitating the men, emancipation is conceived in the model of being manly too. All such associated problems have been understood by third wave of feminism. Postcolonial feminism is one moment of the third wave of feminism. Postcolonial feminism does not have any single theory, but it uses various theories to counter the colonial continuities that exist within the former colonies. It is very new attempt to understand how postcolonial feminism encounters imperialist affect.

Postcolonial Feminism

The word postcolonialism or postcolonial means at least two aspects. The hyphenated term, post-colonial, denotes a particular historical period after the end of colonialism. Without hyphenation, the term 'postcolonial' does not mean the periodisation; but it refers to the forms of representations, reading practices, interventionist approaches and critical elaborations of colonial literatures and practices. It suggests the resistance discourses that emerge from the former colonies. In such a way, it is a method with which to analyse the diverse strategies through which the colonized was represented by the colonizers; and, the way in which the colonized inverted and/or subverted the colonial strategies to empower themselves and to construct their identities in a discursive practice. In this latter sense, postcolonial signifies the reactionary resistance discourse of the colonized against the colonizer's representations. But this resistance discourse is a contextualised and localised discourse which aims at the universalised discourses of colonialism (R.S Sugirtharajah 2006: 7).

First of all, postcolonialism is a multi-disciplinary study, following the patterns of cultural studies, in the sense that postcolonialism derives its strength from variety of resources for understanding the social, cultural, political and historical legitimisations in which colonization took place. For studying these varying aspects, it draws upon the poststructuralism, Marxism, literary studies, linguistics, feminism, critical theories and so on (R.S Sugirtharajah 2006: 8).

Giving importance to singular theory in postcolonial studies forbids the varieties of colonial experiences, colonial subjugations, anti-colonial discourses, geopolitical landscapes of

colonialism, native struggles and so on. Postcolonialism is a move away from the universalising metanarratives of colonial discursive practices. In this way, it gives importance to localised, historicised, contextualised and culture-specific discursive practices. With the influence of postmodernism, it gives thrust to the fragmented nature of colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial practices and discourses. With the foregrounding of interventionist possibilities, the postcolonialism gives lesser importance to theorisation.

Postcolonialism and feminism made the connections by identifying certain common concerns. The postcolonial feminism emerges against the universalising tendencies of Western feminism. Whereas Western feminism did not understand colonialism as one of the important structure in the framing of patriarchal discourses, postcolonial feminism emerges at the connecting point between postcolonialism and feminism, though not limited to these aspects. With variety of colonial practices and cultural subjugations, which were thought to be neglected by the grand theories, postcolonial feminism emerges giving importance to contextual reading. Over and above the colonization of the Third World, there is an increasing sensitivity that the women of the Third World were subjugated by patriarchal concerns. Hence postcolonial feminist criticism understands the position of women as doubly victimised or double colonization. There is a mutually supportive process of colonialism and patriarchy which produce Eastern women in eroticised terms. This is the case of the colonized women, whereas the Western women's relationship with colonialism is different and complicated. They seem to be empowered as members of the 'civilised' colonizing nation, whereas they seem to be disempowered in relation to the Western patriarchal rubric (John McLeod 2010: 175 – 7).

In Indian context, the British imperialism and its administration and missions viewed women as defenceless and weak who needed the enlightened British to rescue and protect them. Over and above the colonization of the Third World, there is an increasing sensitivity that the women of the Third World were subjugated by native patriarchal concerns too. Hence postcolonial feminist criticism understands the position of women as doubly victimised or double colonization. The postcolonial feminism emerges against the universalising tendencies of Western feminism, where Western feminism failed to understand imperialism as one of the important structure in the framing of patriarchal discourses. With variety of

colonial and imperial practices and cultural subjugations, which were thought to be neglected by the grand theories, postcolonial feminism emerges giving importance to contexts rather than theorisation. Imperialist powers have repeatedly captured the language of women's rights and used it to justify imperialism, while simultaneously blocking any reforms that could help liberate women. For example, native elitism and the imperialist forces talk about the need of 'unveiling' the Muslim women; but when women demand concrete reforms that would mean real improvements in their lives, such as health funding, housing, rights and opportunities, and education, they are denied.

In their two part paper on *Border Crossings: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy*, Santra Harding and Uma Narayan discuss about how postcolonial and multicultural feminist thinking refuses to be contained either by the academic disciplinary boundaries or by the categories of race, religion, class, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality, by rethinking the conventional assumptions of knowledge systems. As the sexism, racism, androcentrism and Eurocentrism cannot be identified easily in the covert intentions of the individual actions, they try to search how institutional, societal, philosophical forms of discrimination sanction them to have the effect on the thought of the society. In this way they try to philosophize the 'border crossing' in the context of post-colonial and multicultural reality. (Uma Narayan & Santra Hardings 1998: 3, 4).

Marxism has clearly influenced the thinking of postcolonial scholarship too. In order to understand the nature of inequality and oppression, feminist approaches focus on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Post-colonial feminists argue that this kind of ethical universalism is not only insensitive to different social contexts but also treats all women as in some sense modelled on a Western 'norm.' Postcolonial feminists also challenge the portrayal of women in non-Western societies as passive and voiceless victims while the Western women is portrayed as modern, educated and empowered. Sudbury holds that feminist theory claimed to speak for all women while in fact ignoring coloured women and thus, postcolonial feminism or Third World feminism emerged. As the White feminists generated their discourses of gender discrimination out of the experiences of White women, the need for the postcolonial feminism is felt to be necessary (Julia Sudbury 2000: 721 – 2).

Imperial Gaze

The question is how postcolonial feminism counters the imperialist strategies? How the suppression of women is connected with imperialism? To understand this connection, let us discuss how imperialism works in the realm of culture and how it has contributed to the suppression of women of the Third World.

Colonialism was a Civilising Mission and even after the colonial era, this civilizing mission continues to operate as an ideological justification for imperialism. Colonial subjects were depicted as exotic, uncivilised, backward and weak. With the perceived material and moral superiority of European/Western civilisation, non-European was/is perceived by the European White as “other”. This perception and representation of the Third World people, particularly women, operates in the cultural levels, in order to justify the economic exploitation. This cultural politics has been contested by postcolonial feminism.

In the twentieth century, the devastating effect of imperialism on the economies and semi-colonies has created global migrant labour. Women in this group suffer specific forms of discrimination and a terrible weight of oppression in the 'host' countries. Institutionalised racism/casteism and general manifestations of them in the form of national chauvinism prevent most of these women from benefiting from some of the gains that the women in the imperialist heartlands have won within the context of bourgeois democracy. Racism and casteism in most cases forces these women to retreat back into the migrant communities. Wherever, for cultural or religious reasons, patriarchal ideology dominates these communities women may then face extra obstacles that prevent them from claiming their full democratic rights. For example, immigration controls guarantee a subordinate position for immigrant women since they are termed as dependents of men within the context of marriage. The weight of this oppression and subordination also make it doubly difficult for these women to fight oppression within their own communities and families. Imperialism has helped to reify these notions of gender discrimination. As discussed by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, Occident has created an Orient through their constant scholarship to justify their rule and same thing still we are facing today, though there is a formal end of colonialism. As the Anglo-French imperialism claimed to make egalitarian society in their

colonial lands, it still viewed the Third-World women as passive victims, backward and subordinate as in the case of native patriarchal notions about women.

Racism is in the psychology of imperialism, the spirit of empire, because racism, supplies the element that makes for the righteousness of empire. Hence racism is not simply a by-product of empire but... part of the intestines of empire. (Jan Nederveen Pieterse 1990: 223). Similarly in south Asia casteism lies in the psychology of native imperialism. Similarly cultural nationalism is also perpetuated by imperial ideology under which all others varieties and 'sub-cultures' are getting submerged within the same nation, which represent only a group of cultural elite. Even languages, religions are asserted by a group of elite through imperialist consciousness by continuous filtering the heterogeneity of culture so the cultural elite took imperialist ideology to marginalize, to eliminate their own subaltern people. Even the so called "Indian feminism" made the same abstractions like western feminism as it represents the problems of elite women within India at times. By making such abstractions, there is no space for the articulation of differences within such feminist scholarship. Imperialism is as much cultural and ideological as political and economic also.

With all such denied rights, Postcolonialism as an academic subject, is now well established across humanities and social sciences. Postcolonial feminism seeks to establish social and cultural spaces for non-Western peoples ('subalterns'), whose native cultures were suppressed by the Western value systems promoted as the dominant ideology of colonialism. It seeks to establish intellectual spaces for subalterns to 'speak' for themselves, in their own voices.

Who is a Subaltern?

Gayatri Chakraborty explains the meaning of the term 'subaltern' as follows:

"Subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for the Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. (...) In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not *subaltern*. Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous". I mean, just by

being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern." (*Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa, 1992*)

Subaltern people are never a homogenous group, and they do not share the same cultural identity, solidarity, aims and purposes. Subaltern has no privilege, enters official discourse rarely and usually through mediating commentary. Tough to imagine how the subaltern can ever genuinely speak. To be heard and known, the subaltern must adopt Western ways of knowing, of thought, reasoning, and language. To be recognised, they need to conform to their non-Western knowledge of colonial life to Western ways of knowing the world as well as the nationalist elitist ways of knowing. Can the third world subject ever be studied without cooperation in the colonial project, she asks.

Spivak developed and applied Foucault's term *epistemic violence* to describe the destruction of non-Western ways of perceiving the world, and the resultant dominance of the Western ways of perceiving the world. Conceptually, epistemic violence specifically relates to women, whereby the "Subaltern (woman) must always be caught in translation, never (allowed to be) truly expressing herself", because the colonial/imperial power's destruction of her culture pushed to the social margins her non-Western ways of perceiving, understanding, and knowing the world.

Moreover, Spivak further cautioned against ignoring subaltern peoples as "cultural Others", and said that the West could progress—beyond the colonial perspective—by means of introspective self-criticism of the basic ideals and investigative methods that establish a culturally superior West studying the culturally inferior non-Western peoples. Hence, the integration of the subaltern voice to the intellectual spaces of social studies is problematic, because of the unrealistic opposition to the idea of studying "Others"; Spivak rejected such an anti-intellectual stance by social scientists, and about them said that "to refuse to represent a cultural Other is salving your conscience (...) allowing you not to do any homework." Moreover, postcolonial studies also reject the colonial cultural depiction of subaltern peoples as hollow mimics of the European colonists and their Western ways; and

it rejects the depiction of subaltern peoples as the passive recipient-vessels of the imperial and colonial power of the Mother Country. Consequent to Foucault's philosophic model of the binary relationship of power and knowledge, scholars from the Subaltern Studies Collective, proposed that anti-colonial resistance always counters every exercise of colonial power.

Rereading as a Method of Decolonisation

Spivak has found out the problem in her writing and how to bring back the women voices in reading practices. Postcolonial studies attempts to bring back the subaltern women voices by rereading the text through Saidian contrapuntal method and other rereading practices which would reveal the submerged voices in the text in the construction of dominant narrative. Rereading is very much necessary to find out the in-between gap in the reading practices. To find out the in-between gap we should search for alternative history for the same story and to liberate that particular character from colonial representation and imperial discourses. Rereading the text is to liberate the submerged character from the dominant narrative of the text because knowledge is always associated with the power.

“The act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a neutral activity. *How* we read is just as important as *what* we read... the ideas we encounter within postcolonialism and the issues they raise demand that conventional reading methods and models of interpretation need to be rethought if our reading practices are to contribute to the contestation of colonial discourses to which postcolonialism aspires. Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to postcolonialism”, says McLeod.

Such examples of rereading the text could be found in the postcolonial reading practices. Kwok Pui-lan, a postcolonial feminist biblical critique, mentions an event which she witnessed in the report of female missionary who worked in China, from the archival material. The female missionary reported in the report at the turn of the 20th century that “a Chinese woman who could barely read used a pin to cut from the Bible verses where Paul instructed women to be submissive and remain silent in church”. According to Kwok Pui-lan, this shows how a slice of the natives, if not whole, were not the passive recipients of biblical readings, but remained as active readers engaged in the emancipatory struggle against their

own contextual oppressions, using the medium of Bible which was introduced by the missionaries. On the other hand, the male population uses the same verses to make the woman passive and submissive elements in the public religious and ritual sphere, allocating them a private space for the women within the church community such as women's cell etc. It shows how Chinese woman became active reader, and not as a passive reader of religious text, through her subversive act of eliminating the verses from the bible which goes against the women.

Within the dominant narrative tradition of the bible, Mary of Magdalene is always projected as a repentant prostitute, but alternative reading enables this character as Jesus main disciple of the time. The modern western fictional depictions of Mary of Magdalene also portray her as the repentant prostitute turned into the lover of Jesus. Later historical biblical scholarship proved that how the character of Mary of Magdalene was constructed at the intersection of the presence of Roman Empire and the Jewish patriarchy. Such rereading practices reveal the submerged narrative available in the Apocryphal New Testament books.

Conclusion

Postcolonial feminism has its own limitations and it does not give much importance to actual practice, rather it still holds on to the textual practice. Another main issue witnessed in postcolonial studies suggests that going back to the pre-colonial context as the resolution of the conflict that emerged out of the colonial conditions. Such a reversal of the colonial reality is ahistorical in its approach. An alternative to it is suggested by the art historian, R. Siva Kumar in his catalogue of his exhibition, curated on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of India's Independence, titled, *The Making of a Contextual Modernism*. It later emerged as a postcolonial critical tool in the understanding of Indian art. He suggests that to be indigenous one has to be historicist either in theme or in style, and similarly to be modern one has to adopt a particular trans-national formal language or technique. Modernism was to them neither a style nor a form of internationalism. It was critical re-engagement with the foundational aspects of art necessitated by changes in one's unique historical position.

References

- 1) Pieterse, Jan Nederveen, *Empire and Emancipation: Power and Liberation on a World Scale*, London, 1990.
- 2) McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010.
- 3) Narayan, Uma & Harding, Santra. *Border Crossings: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (part II)*. Hypatia Bloomington: Spring & August, 1998 Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 1-5.
- 4) Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- 5) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- 6) Sudbury, Julia, "Feminism: Black British" in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge*, Volume 2: *Education: Health to Hypertension*, Cheris Kramarae and Dale Spender (eds.), New York: Routledge, 2000.
- 7) Sugirtharajah, R.S (ed.), *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.