

INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM AND MULTICULTURALISM IN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

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Summary. This study focuses on exploration of valuable works of Uma Narayan, which represent a shift from Western models of feminism towards multicultural, postcolonial and transnational feminism. Since its conceptualization, feminism has developed from orientation solely on Western understanding of feminist and cultural concerns to analysis and critique of complex issues of gender and cultural essentialism and awareness of interrelation of major political concepts with race, ethnicity, social class, and gender in different cultural settings.

Key words: Uma Narayan, the West, the Third World, India, feminism, multiculturalism.

Introduction

Feminist scholarship is becoming more and more complex and dynamic phenomenon in our global, postcolonial, and multicultural world. Although there is a lot of work done by Western feminist scholars in developing feminist theory, such contemporary feminists as Uma Narayan have made a shift from Western models of feminism towards multicultural, transnational and postcolonial feminism. In order to address the Westernization of feminist discourse and to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of feminism in the Third World, the analysis of intersection of feminism and multiculturalism is needed. This paper focuses on exploration of the works of Uma Narayan that has had a huge influence on feminist and multicultural theories. Her feminist scholarship has a great impact on development of feminism from orientation solely on Western understanding of gender and cultural concerns to analysis and critique of complex issues of gender and cultural essentialism and awareness of interrelation of major political concepts with race, ethnicity, social class, and gender in different cultural settings.

Western Feminism and the Third-World

The most famous of Narayan's work is *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* that was the 1998 Victoria Schuck Award Winner for the best book on women and politics nominated by the American Political Science Association [9; 11]. It focuses on the notions of culture, nation, tradition, and Westernization with the relation to the Third World feminism. Giving specific examples about cultural contexts, Narayan shows misconception and misrepresentation of Indian feminism in Western and Third World scholarship.

Dislocating Cultures provides an eloquent example about the dowry-murders, one of the most infamous problems that contemporary Indian women face, which has become a popular topic amongst Indian and Western feminists [9]. In India, a dowry is a cultural practice where the woman's family must pay a certain price for another family to accept the woman as a suitable wife for their son. Many heated discussions about women "being burned to death in India" because of dowry are taking place both in academic and nonacademic settings in the USA. According to the official statistics of the U.S. Census Bureau, dowry-murder is defined as "the unnatural death of a woman caused by burns or bodily injury occurring within the first 7 years of marriage [...] performed by her husband or her husband's relatives [...] in connection with a demand for dowry" [10, 5]. Due to the popularity of the dowry-murder topic in Western discourse, Indian culture has been labeled as one that produces constant women killing because of insufficient dowry.

Narayan stresses that "such asymmetries in 'cultural explanation' result in pictures of Third-World women as 'victims of their culture' in ways that are interestingly different from the way in which victimization of mainstream Western women is understood" [9, 85]. In reality, she argues, women who suffer murders as a result of insufficient dowry are not "victims of their culture", but rather victims of domestic violence based on economic motivations. The image of violence against women in Indian society as a cultural issue deters any efforts for social change. In contrast, similar situations of women killings by guns that happen within American communities are seldom correlated and explained by Western theorists as created by American culture. Moreover, as Narayan continues to argue "such deaths have not neces-

sarily been portrayed as the ‘typical’ or ‘paradigmatic’ outcomes of domestic violence situations” [9, p. 90].

She links the “death by culture” image of dowry-murders in India with Western perceptions of “other” cultures as a “frozen” static phenomenon and Third World women as a monolithic complex suffering from their culture. While crossing national borders particular issues within particular cultural contexts start to be analyzed and theorized from Western point of view. As a result, it creates a picture of Third World as exotic and undeveloped and explains women concerns as products of their culture. Narayan complicates the concept “Third World feminism” by pointing on its connection not only to feminist scholarship produced in Third World countries, but also to feminists from communities of color within Western countries. She points out that women’s oppression are spread through both Western and non-Western worlds. Nevertheless, Narayan calls not to assume that contexts or concerns are the same in every culture, but rather to develop effective strategies for transnational solidarity and alliances based on common differences.

Additionally, the influence of Westernization gets a new understanding in her piece. According to Narayan, Third World fundamentalists tend to selective rejection of particular outcomes of Westernization connected to gender equality explaining them as “Western values”, but at the same time use other products of Westernization such as technology, mass-media, and armaments to propagate “traditional” ideology. Speaking about India she underlines that “[t]heir commitment to ‘Indian traditions’ seems unconcerned about whether the entry of television into Indian homes affects our ‘traditional way of life’! Feminist commitment to autonomy or equality for women can be portrayed as ‘Western values’ by the same fundamentalists who discern no paradox, for instance, in appropriating the language of rights when it suits their interests” [9, 22]. In other words, socially dominated groups make convenient choices about appropriateness or non-appropriateness of certain changes in values or practices. They decide which transformations are allowed in particular culture and which ones contradict with cultural preservation. As dominate groups typically represented my heterosexual males of upper class, feminist agenda is usually viewed as one of the most hostile topics to national values in many non-Western contexts.

Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding’s collection *Decentering the Center: Postcolonial and Feminist Challenges to Philosophy* echoes with the topic of multicultural, postcolonial and transnational feminism started in *Dislocating Cultures*, showing its impact on mainstream feminist concerns in philosophy [3]. They underline that “[t]hese multicultural, global, and postcolonial feminist concerns transform mainstream notions of experience, human rights, the origins of philosophic issues, philosophic uses of metaphors of the family, white antiracism, human progress, modernity, the unity of scientific method, the desirability of universal knowledge claims, and other ideas central to philosophy” [3, vii]. The essays emphasize the importance of feminist perspectives in understanding colonial and postcolonial conditions and significance of engaging cultural, ethnic and racial discourses into international feminist scholarship and activism.

The metaphor of “decentering the center” stands for challenging the mainstream feminist philosophies in order to change the situation of production and distribution of knowledge by West as the center and its consumption by non-West as the periphery. Questioning cultural relativism and universalism of Western feminism, Narayan and Harding argue that “democratic, nondogmatic, and open-ended dialogues crucial to feminist attempts to imagine and facilitate more inclusive and egalitarian institutions and practices” [3, ix]. Breaking the boundaries of the hierarchy between the West and the Rest opens opportunities for cross-cultural exchange in a global context.

In addition, in her essay “The Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism” Narayan presents the critique of cultural essentialism of Western gender discourses [6]. She points out:

Given the significant dangers that varieties of cultural essentialism pose to feminist agendas, I believe that the development of a feminist perspective that is committed to antiesentialism both about “women” and about “cultures” is an urgent and important task for a postcolonial feminist perspective. Such a perspective must distinguish and extricate feminist projects of attending to differences among women from problematically essentialist colonial

and postcolonial understandings of “cultural difference” between Western culture and its “Others” [6, p. 104].

In the context of the history of colonization and current postcolonial conditions mainstream Western feminists ignored the voices of non-white, non-western women universalizing feminist discourses that created international misrepresentation of women. According to Narayan, viewing a “woman” as a monolithic universal group prevented Western feminism from taking into an account various economical, political, and cultural interrelations with gender, class, race and ethnicity in the different national contexts. At the same time, considering these differences between women from different countries caused replacing gender essentialism with cultural essentialism in Western feminist discourse because of the existing colonialist understanding of differences between progressive West and inferior non-West. As a result, the Western feminism is often imposed as a liberalization of “backward” women in non-Western countries.

The further analysis of cultural essentialism is continued by Narayan in her article “Undoing the “Package Picture” of Cultures” [8]. She again underlines the dissonance in feminist efforts to take into account differences among women and cultural differences. This contradiction becomes evident in the attempt of Western feminists to switch from universal notions about all women to culturally specific ideas about non-Western women. Narayan demonstrates how essentialist understanding of culture attributes to depiction of women located in that culture as homogeneous group. “The essentialist Package Picture of Cultures represents cultures as if they were entities that exist neatly distinct and separate in the world, independent of our projects of distinguishing among them, obscuring the reality that boundaries between them are human constructs, undermined by existing variations in worldviews and ways of life” [8, p. 1084].

According to Narayan, due to the imperialistic image of the Third World as inferior and the Western World as superior, such values as equality and freedom started to be considered as Western “at the very moment when Western nation were engaged in slavery, colonization, and the denial of liberty and equality to large segments of Western subjects, including women” [8, p. 1083]. Consequently, hegemonic Western feminism that was based on generalization and oversimplification of the Third World women created a monolithic depiction of Third World women as religiously or/and traditionally restricted and Western women as liberated. It gave a justification for “liberating” Third-World countries.

Moreover, national fundamentalists helped to deepen the essentialist depiction of the culture in their efforts to protest against colonization and Westernization. Insisting on preserving national values and practices they as well as Westerners were making distinctions between the West and the Third World. In this way, “Package Picture of Cultures” was created by both Western and non-Western Worlds. Narayan presents the phenomenon of “selective labeling” when “[d]ominant members of a culture often willingly discard what were previously regarded as important cultural practices but resist and protest other cultural changes, often those pertaining to the welfare of women” [8, 1085]. Narayan calls to undermine this “Package Picture of Cultures” in order to see differences among representatives of the same culture and similarities between members of different cultures.

Therefore, there is a clear effort of Uma Narayan to bring multicultural, postcolonial and transnational topics of uniting vs. unitarity to the feminist discourse, which is often marked by objectifying and oversimplifying the Others that considered to be different from the Western World. Opposed to uniting in supportive diverse communities that brings more opportunities for resistance and change, viewing units as unitary monolithic essential groups doesn’t bring any positive outcomes, but silencing, objectifying, oppressing the Others with a paternalistic attitude instead of an attitude of partnership, solidarity and collaboration.

Feminist Perspectives on Political-Cultural Concepts

Multicultural, postcolonial and transnational feminism provide new perspectives in crucial discussions of important political concerns and experiences of various women across the borders. Co-edited with Mary Lyndon Shanley, Narayan’s collection *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives* gives diverse feminist insights that challenge traditional political concepts and introduce discussion of traditionally apolitical concepts [2]. The editors underline the importance of “reshaping political theory in a direction that is more fully

responsive to women's interests, concerns and problems" [2, xi]. In particular, the essays launch feminism perspectives in analyzing various questions of state, power, privacy, citizenship, rights, dependency, compassion, violence against women and children in politics.

For instance, in her own essay "Towards a Feminist Vision of Citizenship: Rethinking the Implications of Dignity, Political Participation, and Nationality" Narayan reexamines conventional meaning of citizenship, which includes people only on the basis of individual contribution or nationality, and exclude "non-contributors" and non-citizens [7]. According to the "contribution" understanding of citizenship, people who do not obviously and directly contribute the state, as for example mothers, who raise their children at home, don't have the same social standing and position as wage workers. Instead of this narrow understanding, she offers to shift to "participation" model of citizenship. Rather than view citizens solely as resources-givers in paid labor or military service, Narayan calls that "dignity, worth, and social standing matter to all who are *participants* in national life, that is, *who are part of the national community*, independently of how they *contribute* to it" [7, p. 52].

Similarly, citizenship as nationality should be reexamined in framework of this new "participation" understanding of citizenship as Narayan puts. Non-citizen residents fully participating in national life are totally left out from benefits of citizenship. She argues for the creating the political environment that is "responsive to the dignity and worth of all its members" [7, 65]. The proposed by Narayan change in understanding citizenship will help to create the conditions that make visible "non-contributors" and non-citizens and allow everyone's participation.

As a continuation of the discussion of citizenship Narayan's article "Male-Order' Brides: Immigrant Women, Domestic Violence and Immigration Law" raises the question about the interrelation of immigration policy and high risks of battering of immigrant women [4]. She states that immigrant situation of women, who are often from Third World countries, even more complicates their marginalized position in society. According to Narayan, being marked by race, ethnicity, class, language, religion that do not fit dominant cultural norms, immigrant women experience additional consequences of their "dependent immigration status" because of discrimination and oppression by husbands and legislation that is not helpful in the situation of domestic violence. These women totally depend on their spouses who have control in decision of their immigration status for several years. She emphasizes that being in a new country and usually without necessary knowledge and skills of surviving in foreign contexts, immigrant women who experience domestic violence are limited by legal rules in their autonomy.

Narayan discusses factors that make immigrant women especially exposed to domestic violence. She admits that combination of racism and powerlessness with sexism and cultural chauvinism is the most influential in complicating the dependent situation of immigrant women that undergo battering and mistreatment in their families. According to the study cited in the article, Narayan underlines that "77 percent of women with dependent immigrant status are battered" [4, p. 106]. Also, many women from the Third World and Post-Soviet bloc countries came to the States as "mail-order brides". They became victims of men that "want women who will be totally dependent on them" [4, p. 107]. Moreover, the immigrant law seems to be unfavorable to the well-being of immigrant women who face violence in their marriages and blind to their specific problems.

Hence, the valuable shift in understanding citizenship and its benefits for all participants of national life was made by Narayan. She claims that:

Although writing on citizenship has often been concerned with a just and equal distribution of the privileges and benefits of membership to members of groups marginalized *within* a national community, the focus has tended to be on inequalities affecting those who are *already members* of the body of citizens and not on those involved in the process of acquiring such membership [4, p. 117].

In addition to the previous pieces, another volume of essays *Having and Raising Children: Unconventional Families, Hard Choices, and the Social Good* collected by Uma Narayan and Julia J. Bartkowiak brings feminist perspective on rights and roles of children, parents, and state [1]. Specific issues of the understanding and interpreting the concepts of parenthood and children's autonomy are addressed by various authors published in this collection. In particular, they explore questions of normativity of two-parent heterosexu-

al family, biological vs. nonbiological families, complexities of surrogate motherhood, lesbian parents' responsibilities, parents and disabled children, abortion rights, children's autonomy, gender identity disorder, and religion.

The chapter "Family Ties: Rethinking Parental Claims in the Light of Surrogacy and Custody" presented by Narayan shows the links between ordinary motherhood, commercial and gift surrogacy in their character of economic and gender-role exploitation of women [5]. She builds her arguments on the basis of the discussion of essentialism and social constructionism in defining rights and duties of parents. Narayan stresses that the unclearness of the question of custody in the situation of surrogacy will be resolved if the law "consider genetic and gestational connections as well as the relationship of care giving as a compelling...basis for parental claim to children" [5, p. 82]. In other words, better legal regulations of the practices of surrogacy and motherhood should be established in order to regulate questions of custody.

Thus, Narayan takes our attention to unexplored topics in political theory bringing a feminist perspective on such topics as citizenship, immigration, and parenthood at multicultural, transnational level. Wearing critical feminist and multicultural lenses she demonstrates the ways in which conventional understanding of main political-cultural concepts limits opportunities of marginalized groups and complicates their being as outsiders of dominant culture.

Conclusion

Therefore, Uma Narayan, a prolific feminist scholar, has shifted evolution of feminist thought towards multicultural, postcolonial and transnational reading of feminism. Influenced by these ideologies feminism started to see limits of Western perceptions of feminist discourses based on essentialism and universalism in explaining the Third World. Furthermore, it became more conscious of intersection of feminism and multiculturalism, particularly interrelation of major political-cultural concepts such as citizenship, immigration, and parenthood with race, ethnicity, social class, and gender in different cultural settings. Multicultural, postcolonial and transnational directions in feminism are crucial in the face of contemporary global challenges that require better understanding of the complex interrelations of different cultural settings and feminist concern that influence lives of women cross borders.

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