

## **CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY (1955- ) AND THIRD WORLD FEMINISM**

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Third World feminism developed partly in response to the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s that emerged mainly in the West, and which tended to portray the experience of white, Western, middle and upper-class women as the predominant experience of all women. Third World feminism advanced a critique of such a “global sisterhood” (Morgan 1984; Mohanty 1984), which is based on the idea of a common oppression and victimhood (hooks 1986) and therefore shared values and aspirations, but which underestimates class interests, racial oppression, imperialism and the colonial experience. More than academic critique, however, it was real tensions within the feminist movements that forced a reckoning with questions of race, class and imperialism. While some women’s liberation activists in the West during this period drew inspiration from the powerful national liberation movements taking place in the colonies (Aguilar 2015), Third World feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, Chandra Mohanty and others, challenged the sexism of black male patriarchy and the racism of mainstream feminism. They looked to the civil rights movement and to the history of black women’s contributions to feminist thought and organizing. In doing so, they also developed intellectual roots independent of second-wave feminism. Third World feminism aimed both to appreciate difference, and to forge commonalities across borders in the fight against oppression.

Third World feminism later influenced the development of postcolonial feminism, which emerged in the 1980s with the postmodern turn. Postcolonial feminism critiqued Western feminism by emphasizing the complexity and diversity of women’s oppression and by deconstructing representations of women in nationalist discourses as symbols of traditional, ostensibly pristine, pre-colonial times. It sought to call attention to women’s struggles against patriarchal colonial legacies. The anti-imperialist and anti-racist campaigns of mass resistance against the postcolonial state have been central to both Third World feminism and postcolonial feminism. Third World feminists also claimed that the simultaneous oppression of sexism, racism and capitalism resulted in a “triple jeopardy” (Aguilar 2015) for Third World women. The preoccupation of these feminisms, including transnational feminism – which also rejects the “global sisterhood” paradigm – has been how to build solidarity across borders. Transnational feminism draws on postcolonial feminism, using “the politics of location” (Rich 1984; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Alexander and Mohanty 1997) as a method with the potential both to deconstruct dominant hierarchies of identity, power and privilege, and to construct solidarity between women in different geographical contexts. The term “transnational” was intended as an alternative to “global” and “international” (Nagar and Swarr 2010, 4), and although it is not always “a radical category or one that speaks to a transformative or liberatory praxis” (Alexander and Mohanty 2010, 43), transnational feminism is also used to describe the activism associated with the theory.

The neglect of the experience of women in the Global South by Western feminism was captured most strikingly in the seminal essay by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” written in 1984 and updated in 1991. In it, Mohanty interrogates the construction of “Third World” women by feminists in privileged positions of global knowledge production in Western universities, who were inclined to universalize female experience, idealize Western women’s own freedoms relative to non-Western women, and essentialize women of color as passive victims, effectively silencing historical and contemporary feminist struggles taking place in the Global South. Mohanty insisted on using the term “Third World” as it retains a connection to colonialism and contemporary forms of economic and geopolitical domination, and yet “is meant to suggest a continuous questioning of the designation” (Mohanty 1984, 354). The original connotations of the Third World as a project were, of course, redemptive and even revolutionary (Prashad 2007), connected as they were to political movements prior to and following decolonization.

The aim of the essay was not limited to making a culturalist argument about ethnocentrism (Mohanty 1984, 336) but criticized the class position of certain Western feminists and the separatist strategies of a certain strand of feminism: “It was intended both as a critique of the universalizing and colonizing tendencies of feminist theorizing and as a methodological intervention arguing for historicizing and contextualizing feminist scholarship. ‘Under Western Eyes’ had a clear political purpose” (Mohanty 2013, 975-6). Although based in Western academia herself, Mohanty argues that feminist scholarship must be linked to political practice, and much of her work has focused on building dissent within the neoliberal academy and on organizing in the struggles around racism, war, immigrants and refugees, incarceration, and civil rights in the US and beyond.

In contrast, mainstream feminism – or “free-market feminism” according to Alexander and Mohanty (1997, xv) – has served to reinforce racism and marginalize the concerns of working-class women by focusing on the backwardness of culture, tradition and religion as ostensibly holding back women in the Global South. A failure to develop an analysis of the state and to recognize the role of Western states in capitalist expansion and imperialist aggression has meant that elite, Western feminists have often been at the forefront of promoting military intervention, for example, by advocating for the liberation of women through the War on Terror following 9/11 (Eisenstein 2009, 174; Riley et al. 2008, 11). The legacy of Third World feminism has been both the denunciation of imperialism, in particular of the Western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the misogynistic practices upheld by those who dismiss feminism as a Western ideology.

Situating Mohanty’s work and Third World feminism in an analysis of class, race and imperialism, and of working-class organization, this entry contributes to assessing the contributions of Third World feminism and what a Marxist perspective and the centrality of the capital-labor relation offers to anti-imperialist and anti-racist organizing across borders. The following sections elaborate on questions that women’s movements throughout history have consistently grappled with: the need for recognizing difference but also building solidarities across difference, gendered struggles against the state and colonial rule, women’s labor in the global economy and strategies for resistance.

### *Universalism and difference*

If Western feminism tended to universalize the conditions and experience of women, overlooking distinctions of race, nationality, class and other differences and their influence on women’s rights, desires, and capacity to organize, it followed that the solutions it proposed – such as equal pay, legal rights, abortion etc. – would be applicable to all women, without considering the diversity of historical contexts and backgrounds. Mohanty develops an important polemic against this position and against the notion of a universal patriarchy that views women as an undifferentiated group and in which all men oppress all women. The assumption that women are a homogenous category sharing the same oppression limits feminist scholarship into binary divisions between men who possess power and therefore dominate, and women who lack power. If sexual difference is the central division in society then “the implication is that the accession to power of women as a group is sufficient to dismantle the existing organization of relations” (Mohanty 1984, 351). But women are not “essentially superior or infallible” (1984, 351) on the basis of their biology. Mohanty rejects a universal patriarchal framework as the central mode of exploitation because it suggests either “an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, ahistorical power hierarchy” (1984, 335). Rather what is needed, in her view, is an analysis of the exploitation of Third World women workers by multinational capital (Mohanty et al. 1991, 30), in terms that reveal the sexualization and racialization of the work that women do. This would both challenge the ideological construction of “women’s work” as a naturalized category and press towards realizing the potential for women workers to exercise their agency.

Third World feminist scholarship more broadly has sought to address the relationship between the cultural and ideological construction of what it means to be a woman and the real experiences of women – living, material subjects with distinct collective histories. For much of mainstream Western feminist scholarship, conversely, this relationship is constructed on the basis of assumptions about the Third World – a geography bound by monolithic and static notions of patriarchy, culture and history – and Third World women. This ultimately homogenizes the complexity and conflict in women’s lives and ignores the power that is exercised by Western feminism itself. In what Mohanty describes as “the colonialist move” (Mohanty 1984, 349), Western feminists become the true subjects of history, while non-Western women remain at the level of study, objects lacking history, political agency and subjectivity. Western women are then defined as the arbiters, those who judge other women according to Western standards. Ultimately, Mohanty argues, without the construction of the “Third World woman” as traditional, domestic, veiled, family-oriented etc., the self-representation of Western women as liberated cannot be sustained.

The corollary of mainstream feminist analysis is that it limits an understanding through which to develop the practical possibilities of women and men fighting together against a system that shapes the social relations that produce women’s oppression. Prioritizing gender over race, nationality and class, for example, would discount the potential of black women organizing with black men against racial oppression, or women and men organizing within national liberation movements against colonialism. For Third World women and black women, the experience of sexism was profoundly racialized, and race was as critical a question as gender. In the US, for example, the idea that women’s liberation could not be separated from black liberation was recognized as early as the 1830s: women were being brought into the factory system and began to make connections between the erosion of their role as producers in the home together with the rising ideology of womanhood – in which being a wife and mother were ideals (Davis 1983, 32) – and the slave system. Both served the interests of capital accumulation. More recently, black feminist organizations such as the Combahee River Collective, formed in 1974 and steeped in a context of economic and social crisis, introduced the term “identity politics” in a landmark statement issued in 1977 to describe the interlocking oppressions that black women face (Taylor 2017), such that gender oppression cannot be the sole basis on which the movement is built. The task – which was unresolved by the collective – was how to work across difference and on what basis.

The critique of an abstract feminist universalism aimed to subvert the historical connection between colonialism and patriarchy, emphasizing context, particularities of experience and history, and local politics. Only once these factors were identified and revealed could solutions to division be found. In analyzing these contradictions in mainstream feminist theory, Mohanty not only contributed to opening the space for historical analysis but pointed to the need for collective struggle and solidarity across difference, one that is both anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (Mohanty 2003a). But Mohanty also develops a critique of the local and emphasizes aspects of the universal that remain necessary. She calls for a systemic critique of the neoliberal, postmodernist assumption that grand narratives are reductionist and neglectful of difference. For Mohanty, the need for theory in analyzing the universal is crucial in order “to address fundamental questions of systemic power and inequalities and to develop feminist, antiracist analyses of neoliberalism, militarism, and heterosexism as nation-state-building projects” (Mohanty 2013, 968). Mohanty argues for an explanatory account of the systemic nature of power, but it is her engagement with women’s concrete struggles that grounds this theory in the workings of power and material reality (Mohanty 2003a). In noting that the Israeli state’s occupation of Palestine is supported by US economic and military aid, for example, and that Israel has now become the largest arms supplier to India, Mohanty denounces the political uses of Islamophobia in countries like the US, Israel and India and the entanglement between humanitarianism, NGOs and militarism (Mohanty 2011). Her work on Palestine is instructive of how attention to local struggles contributes to a universal understanding of the workings of the capitalist system. Feminist

scholarship, according to Mohanty, must focus on making the connections between capitalist exploitation, militarization and “the gendered violence of securitized states” (2011, 77), while highlighting spaces for resistance and organizing, particularly by women as they sustain daily life under punishing conditions.

### *Colonialism, nationalism and women’s oppression*

Taking place alongside feminist struggles in the West, the struggle for women’s emancipation in the colonies was bound up in the struggle for national liberation and formed an essential part of the struggle for democracy. Women in the Third World were making connections between women’s liberation and national liberation: they resented their roles as cultural symbols of the nation, often promoted by male nationalist reformers, but also rejected colonialist modernity, which aimed to liberate women from traditional and oppressive social practices for the purposes of developing them as cheap sources of labor (Jayawardena 2016, 8). From the 1980s, a growing body of scholarship emerged in relation to the history of organizing for women’s liberation in the colonies (Jayawardena 2016), and to the feminist consciousness that had developed in response to colonialism and imperialism. Colonial rule attempted to naturalize the idea of the white, masculine figure embodying the power of the empire, sanctioned by a system of laws and practices and imputed with superiority and moral significance: the “authority, discipline... and self-sacrifice” (Mohanty et al. 1991, 17) of white men rendered colonized people incapable of self-government. Mohanty argues that as colonial rule was fundamentally about economic surplus extraction from the colonies, the colonial state needed sexualized, racialized and violent institutions and ideologies to legitimate practices of ruling.

Not only did racism and the erasure of the history of the colonies serve to legitimize colonialism, aggravating existing inequalities and creating new ones, but the economic interests of both the colonial powers and local elites could be served through patriarchal practices regulating the sexuality of women and their entry into the labor force and politics (1991, 19-20). The enduring tensions between the interests of middle and upper-class women and working-class women in the colonies were visible from the outset: the construction of middle-class womanhood – and the limited social reforms accompanying it, such as literacy and education, property rights and the ending of polygamy – was often tied to a bourgeoisie that wanted to “promote stable family life as a cornerstone of capitalist development” (Jayawardena 2016, 256). As capitalist expansion and the forcible opening up of markets reinforced class divisions and deepened capitalist social relations of production and reproduction, the emerging national bourgeoisies responded either by organizing to expel the colonial powers through nationalist movements involving the working classes, or by negotiating with the colonial powers to secure more profitable positions for themselves.

While some women accepted traditional roles in the postcolonial era, many working-class women recognized the potential for revolutionary movements – including in Algeria, Cuba, Egypt, India, Vietnam and elsewhere (Prashad 2007, 57) – to bring about the end of all oppression (Jayawardena 2016). In most cases, however, women revolutionaries were unable to use the national liberation movements to press for a wider revolutionary consciousness, and gains such as women’s suffrage were achieved within the parameters set mainly by male nationalist reformers. After independence, it was often these national bourgeoisies who would take over as rulers in order to consolidate a labor supply for capital accumulation, but which also needed women to perform the domestic labor that would ensure the reproduction of labor power within the household.

The need for women’s labor produced contradictory dynamics. On the one side, allowing women’s entry into the workforces of modernizing nations meant that traditional practices restricting mobility and enforcing seclusion had to be moderated (Jayawardena 2016). On the other side, once postcolonial reforms worked to stabilize the capital-labor relation in the

productive sphere, they reinforced women's roles in the domestic sphere. For both foreign and national capitalists, women – and in particular women of color in the Global South – continue to be the cheapest sources of labor, whether for agriculture or industry. Here lies the contemporary universal experience of working-class women: as modernization and capitalist development needs women workers to fill the ranks of the reserve army of labor, the exploitation and oppression of women serves to push wages down. Gender and racial discrimination deepen exploitation and oppression both in the Global North and South, but the experience of labor, across borders, is interconnected.

### *Women's labor under capitalism*

The exploitation of Third World women and the power of their agency have been significant themes of analysis for Mohanty. Drawing on the work of Mies (1982) and her study of lacemakers in Narsapur, India, Mohanty reiterates Mies' argument that defining women as housewives in relation to men and categorizing women's work in the household as "leisure" facilitated the accumulation of capital (Mohanty 2003, 149). Mies (1982) argues that the feminization of production – defined as growing numbers of women entering the global labor force as employment conditions for both women and men have become increasingly casualized, flexible and poorly paid – meant that women were producing for the world market and became a lucrative source of profit for local businessmen. From this observation, however, Mies argues that production relations are built on relations of reproduction, and that because women subsidize the wages of their husbands, the primary source of exploitation is men: "it is precisely this unequal and exploitative relationship between men and women which enables the total system to perpetuate itself" (Mies 1982, 109). But as Gilliam (1991, 229) argues, the "issue was not about men's oppression of women, but about the impact of unequal and international labor structures on family relations". Ideological processes at work in contemporary production serve to reinforce "normative understandings of femininity, womanhood, and sexual identity" (Mohanty 2003, 152), particularly in global value chains that seek immigrant women as sources of cheap labor-power, who are purported to be unskilled and disciplined, and able to tolerate repetitive, tedious work.

In both the Global North and South, it is women's labor, productive and reproductive, that is increasingly relied on as jobs are cut, wages decline and government budgets for welfare are slashed (Eisenstein 2009, 15). Capitalist relations of production structure relations of reproduction and the sexual division of labor on a global scale, ensuring that the subordinate position of women – both as low-paid workers in the sphere of production and unpaid for their reproductive work – is profitable for the system. As the reproduction of labor power is essential for the reproduction of capitalism, the oppression of women – including racism and other manifestations of oppression – is located in the needs of capital. The class location of women, including class differentiation between women, is important to define (German 2018), particularly as women in the Global South form the bulk of the world's working class, whether or not they are temporarily outside paid work.

While acknowledging the objective interests of Third World women based on their social location and experience as workers, Mohanty argues against what she claims is a narrow definition of class struggle – that between capital and labor – and against trade union methods based primarily on "the class interests of the male worker" (Mohanty 2003, 143). Yet by rejecting definitions of capital and labor as "no longer totally accurate or viable" (2003, 161), Mohanty foregrounds the challenge of articulating common interests at the level of subjective needs and desires, which she argues have a transformative dimension, while underplaying the objective interests of women workers in the capitalist system. Grounding the identity of women workers in histories of race, gender and caste (2003, 167) is crucial, but in organizing women workers across borders or within them, the objective category of class must be central to the "revolutionary basis for struggles against capitalist recolonization" (2003, 168) that Mohanty calls for. Mohanty's call will only have real

purchase if a class perspective is used, which avoids reifying gender to the point where men are seen as the source of the exploitation of women, as two distinct classes (Gilliam 1991, 216). Ultimately, political unity and resistance must be combined with concrete strategies based on objective, material conditions, and an analysis of the workings of capitalism, to which capital and labor are central. A critique that is not only about equal access, but transformation of the system, must start from an analysis of the global economy built on the paid and unpaid labor of women, particularly women of color in the Global South.

### *Strategies for resisting the capitalist state*

In presenting the complexities of the experience of women under capitalism, the theoretical contributions of Mohanty and Third World feminist scholarship in general have been significant. The challenge for feminism is how to build a genuinely transnational movement that respects difference, universalizes on the basis of working-class solidarity and is oriented towards transforming capitalist social relations in their totality. One of Mohanty's preoccupations has been the need for decolonizing knowledge production in the neoliberal academy (Mohanty 2013, 975). This has involved an analysis of both the general and the specific: the transnational reach of neoliberal academic culture but also a concrete and place-based narrative that includes organizing against it. The extent to which Mohanty's work has influenced an understanding of feminism that is based on "solidarity and resistance to empire and global capital" (Mohanty 2013, 984), depends on the development of a coherent strategy, both at the level of the nation-state (Herr 2014) and beyond. Needless to say, the academy cannot be the only or even the main space of struggle. Not only does Mohanty place a great deal of emphasis on organizing, she argues against academic feminism "whereby the boundaries of the academy stand in for the entire world and feminism becomes a way to advance academic careers rather than a call for fundamental and collective social and economic transformation" (Mohanty 2003, 6). It is this political approach, insisting on concrete and collective struggle rather than an overemphasis on subjective experience, that can offer a basis for emancipation.

In the early 1990s, Mohanty argued that "the nation-state is no longer an appropriate socioeconomic unit for analysis" (Mohanty et al. 1991, 2) because of the dominance of transnational corporations and because factories were migrating in search of cheap labor. This was not a rejection of the role of the state as such, as Mohanty noted that working-class and women of color have often been subjected to intervention by the state in their personal lives through, for example, sterilization programs, and must deal with the fact that a disproportionate number of black men are drafted into the army and incarcerated (1991, 9). States are militarized and own the means of organized violence, and as such can reinforce racism and sexism as they discipline populations in the mediation of capital accumulation (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xxiii-xxiv). Since women's movements have always been part of and develop in relation to the wider social movements of society at a particular time (Jayawardena 2016, 10), the possibilities for constructing alliances across borders and within borders – across race, culture, identity and sexuality – and on the basis of class solidarities against the nation-state, are vital.

Following the launch of the War on Terror, Mohanty and others (Riley et al. 2008) have drawn attention to how women and women's groups have been central to organizing against imperialist wars, interrogating the use of feminism to justify war and highlighting the connections within contemporary imperialism between foreign policy objectives and domestic racism, increased surveillance and austerity. Women have been at the forefront of Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, the International Women's Strike following the election of Trump and the climate justice movement, among countless other movements. The strength of Mohanty's work is that it has been interventionist: to develop "a feminist anticapitalist critique that constitutes a radical intervention in a neoliberal academic culture and corporate academy" (Mohanty 2013, 977) but, crucially, one that is advanced in conjunction with the

movements against capitalism. It is the latter – and how the work and legacy of Third World feminism has been taken up in the movements and by activists, rather than in academic establishments – that has contributed to developing strategies that have the potential to confront the core of capitalist production and build international solidarity along class lines, within which gender and racial equality are central.

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