

Theorising Transnational Feminist Praxis

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Abstract

This paper identifies major features of the transnational feminist theory. The framework of transnational feminism as opposite to the universally upheld 'global sisterhood' in activist practices is to be analyzed in the paper. By drawing on psychologically biased notions of structural inequality where global feminism identifies racism and sexism in individualized terms rather than calling for collective feeling, Transnational feminist praxis subverts the Liberal Feminism which is gaining worldwide attention recently. In this paper, major women's studies professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty's works are conceptualized in brief within a larger framework of feminism and anti-imperialism. This paper addresses issues important to Gender studies, namely how to incorporate differences of race, class, and sexuality more fully into feminist discourse so as to particularize the fact of intersectionality in contexts.

Keywords: Transnational Feminism; Global Sisterhood; Transnational feminist praxis; Liberal Feminism

The term 'trans' means 'beyond' and the literal meaning of the term 'transnational' can be 'beyond national level'. The feministic aspects have reached far and beyond nations throughout the centuries. From time immemorial, the differences among men and women have been accounted through the term feminism. But majority of women are doubly marginalized within the constraints of race, nation, gender, class and even sexuality nowadays. This reality has classified feminism into the intersectional approach and moreover transnational approach where the contemporary feminist paradigm has major concern with how globalization and capitalism affect people across national boundaries, race, class etc... Thus the term "transnational" can mean either as a rejection or reaction of the larger terms "international" and "global feminism". The long held ideologies of superior white thoughts along with how the Western feminist practice acquire a strategic position throughout the whole world by the introduction of the classist model of feminist practices to the frame is critiqued in the so-called transnational feminism. Intersectionality forms the lynchpin of the movement and also in addition, the theory connects with analytical practice and labor on a "geopolitical scale".

The paper analyses major features of transnational feminism and discusses in detail the characteristics which issue a foundation for translational feminist practice. The lately developed post colonial and "colour feminism" made the old notion of "sisterhood is global" fall apart into pieces in the contemporary scenario which paved way for transnational feminism. The idea of 'global feminism' or 'sisterhood' was actively propagated since the late 1960s as

'international feminism' which held the comparative approaches to women's issues mainly in the Global South. This type of feminist approach never distinguished between feminism and Western feminism but subsequently the western feministic ideology were something to be questioned due to its presumptions. The so-called hegemonic feminism only addresses and forefronts the concerns of the white women.

Transnational feminism takes into account the perspectives of neglected or marginalized women both locally and globally as it radically restructures politics of gender. The name may suggest the praxis as against the idea of nation/state and the violence at the national level. Transnational feminist "focus on the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe; they transcend nation-state boundaries and speak to a wide range of interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relationships and experiences in a geopolitical context." In the late 1980s, the movement emerged historically through the UN sponsored women's conferences and the increasing contact of feminism's across the North South divide:

Transnational feminism, on the other hand, argues that models of sisterhood that presume a white, middle-class feminist subject located in the Global North ignore the meaningful differences between women both locally and globally, and imagine white women from the Global North as saviors of their disadvantaged "sisters." Instead, transnational feminism asks how the perspectives of women excluded from such hegemonic feminist imaginings can radically reshape feminist politics.

During the period, widespread debates developed between 'third world' and the 'Western' feminist approaches where the former signifies weaker sections of society while the latter implies the notion of global sisterhood. Western feminism announces the liberal feminism of the whites in U.S and also the superior privileged high class women. The Western feminists projected out monolithic facts about woman's oppression analyzing their own cultural specific practices and experiences, anecdotes as putative universal facts. Thus, a culturally specific literature and feminism transverse across the world where the Western feminists homogenized third world's life stories, experience and crisis and additionally eradicating their cultural, national, class and other specificities and thus "denying them historical subjectivity" (Mohanty,1991).

Transnational feminism developed in the US Academy and this debated the stand of the feminism either as an academic subject or as an activist movement since the feminist movement has been added within Academy or both. Similarly, even though transnational feminism encompasses a locality of identities, regions, communities and cultures, these are obscured as secondary criteria of transnational approaches. Richa Nagar and Amanda Dwarrr in *Critical Transnational Feminism Praxis*, argues that is useful to think of "transnational feminist studies [as] a necessarily unstable field that must contest its very definition in order to be useful" (Nagar and Swarr , Anthologies, p. 12).

The question "What is Transnational Feminism?" does give an answer but in order to evaluate this question, one should analyze what the theory actually does. Transnational Feminism is also bordered within other pedagogical ideologies of Post Colonial Feminism, Women of color Feminism, Third World Feminism etc...This approach transcends the Western schools of thoughts and focus also on the fate of displaced and marginalized sections of society like refugees, immigrants, subaltern etc...those who have experienced "forced migration ...members of a cultural diaspora who may be dispersed across multiple regions, as well as those who identify themselves as third-culture persons and persons who are attempting to integrate multiple cultural identities...It also encompasses the experiences of women who live in cultural borderlands and spaces between cultures."(Horne & Arora, 2013).

The term 'Transnational Feminism' have gained increasing momentum since its first appearance in 1994 by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan in their germinal text *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, which situated transnational feminism among other theories of feminism, modernity, and post modernity and their shades of meaning have also changed through time. Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt define 'transnational feminist movements' in the Introduction for the *Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* as:

the fluid coalescence of organizations, networks, coalitions, campaigns, analysis, advocacy and actions that politicize women's rights and gender equality issues beyond the nation-state, particularly from the 1990s, when deepening globalization and new communications and information technologies (ICTs) enabled feminists to connect readily with and interrogate their localities and cross-border relations. (4)

Earlier, the term had four meanings attached in feminist scholarship. Brency Mendoza (202:296) identified it as feminist activism. Western liberal feminism masqueraded under the title 'global sisterhood', while the third-world women criticized it and advocated the transnational and "cross-cultural feminist praxis" which aimed at clearing out the inequalities among women of color and no color. They also integrated the cultural, social, geopolitical differences into the theory. They imposed a truly "anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist" feminist movement in the transnational practices. The most influential theorist of Third World and transnational feminisms, Mohanty is best known *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), and *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997). Her new book moves beyond postmodernist relativism to adopt historical materialism and validated sub-altern women's experiences. She focuses on a critique of global capitalism, the books integrate theory and practice through advocacy of "emancipatory knowledge" (p. 1) and "feminist solidarity" (p. 3). The pragmatic statement of this was Mohanty's 1984 essay, 'Under the Western Eyes'. Mohanty's two co-edited anthologies remain the representative work which shaped the course of 1990s US Academy classes, where she advocates highlighting "relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity" (p. 242) and encourage students to

"envision the possibility of activism and struggle outside the academy" (p. 243). Mohanty along with her fellow writers, Grewal and Kaplan are on the feminist left side and they rose to fame and recognition through critiquing the

idea of the bogus global sisterhood by standing in solidarity for trans-nationalism. Mohanty does not agree with others with how the centre-periphery (hegemonic/ counter-hegemonic) constructions mobilise.



Fig.1. How Transnational Feminist Organizing Offers a Model for the Future

The postcolonial feminist theories have been continuously emphasizing on the colonial legacies which in turn influence and continued to be a growing influence on the social, economic and political oppression of people all over the world. The transnational feminist approach draws from this third world feminist theories which reject the notion that the different parts of the world have same gender issues and inequality. Additionally, the examination of how global capitalism has developed such relations of exploitation also complicates the theories. A critique of the theories, feminism has been undermined with the utopian ideas of global feminism while "colonialism, racism and imperialism" oppresses the vicinity of feminism. Transnational feminism lays groundwork for more equality of "social relations among women across borders and cultural contexts". Central focus of transnational feminism is to eliminate the differences between women in various parts and to hoist solidarity between feminists:

Respect for differences includes recognizing global power differences and regional perspectives, listening to women from Southern regions whose experiences challenge partial viewpoints, viewing differences among women as opportunities to enrich our understandings of complex

issues, and highlighting the perspectives of women whose voices have often been silenced. Eradicating inequalities and centralizing the concerns and strengths of feminists from multiple world regions, especially the Global South and marginalized women of color, represent major goals. Cultural humility on the part of feminists from the Global North is also necessary for creating productive transnational collaborative frameworks that dislodge power dynamics that have often resulted in unequal relationships between feminists from wealthy countries and women from many other regions around the world. (Carolyn Zerbe Enns, 2020)

Transnational feminism is also described as "transnational feminist practice" and "transnational practices". *Critical Translation Feminist Praxis* written by Amanda Swari and Richa Nagar "rejects" the term which can be seen indicative of U.S and Canadian Departments. Strictly the terms "women of colour" feminisms "third world feminism" and "multicultural feminism" encompasses uncompromising standards. The "heteronormative gender constructs" are discarded in the use of the term transnational feminism by the leading proponents Chandra Mohanty, Jacques Alexander, Underhill Grewal and Caren Kaplan. The binaries First World / Third World are also

negated and the stress is on Transnational Feminism as it has political power as the former doesn't take into account the differences of race, class, culture or "imperialist histories". Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan in their book *Women Studies on its own: a next wave reader in institutional change* claims that the term "transnational":

Transnational as a term is useful only when it signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital. Through such critical recognition, the links among patriarchies, colonialisms, racisms, and feminisms become more apparent and available for critique or appropriation. The history of the term "international", by contrast, is quite different. (Kaplan, Grewal.2002).

The term "transnationalism" de-emphasizes the inequalities between nations and it is more of studying the 'other'. Globalisation paved the way for the growth of transnational networks which in turn organized women around the world against the rising gender inequality. The movement which created momentum to gather the transnational feminist networks was the UN Decade for women of 1976-1985 and the UN Conferences on women between 1975 and 1995. Feminism was projected on to the wider global frame as the separation between Third World and Western Feminism came into highlight. Liberal feminism proposed the general idea of emancipation of how women are oppressed in a household and how they try to escape from the boundaries of home. They later received education and entered the labour force. They considered Western feminism as 'ethnocentric' and they had the blind assumption that every woman has the same problem all around the globe.

In theory, transnational feminist theories aims at destabilizing the liberal feminist notion those women throughout the world face the same kind of oppression. First world women and Third World women are different in the differences of class, race, gender etc... In *Scattered Hegemonies : Post Modernity and Transnational Feminist Practises*, the writers structure the theory as the one " that critiques modernity through the lens of feminist theory". Since feminism critiques Postmodernism as it includes global capitalism and the exhibition of how non- Western cultures are different and marginal to the Western cultures. Mohanty states "postmodernist critique that is skeptical of a systematic analysis of institutionalized power and of decolonizing methodologies that center marginalized experience (women of color epistemology) in struggles for

justice is seriously off the mark".(Mohanty, C.T. 2013).The essential difference between the women in various parts of the world needs to be identified but also keeping the unity intact. The definition of a 'woman' can be different for separate cultures as Grewal and Kaplan expresses:

In working to construct such a terrain for coalition and cooperation, however, we have to rearticulate the histories of how people in different locations and circumstances are linked by the spread of and resistance to modern capitalist social formations even as their experiences of these phenomena are not at all the same or equal.

In different parts of the globe, issues of women differ. For example, in Brazil, transnational feminists address the issue of gender relations in family agriculture. But in South Africa, women face racial segregation, gender oppression and also oppression as workers. Another example of the disparity between Western feminist theories and transnational theories is that while the ban against wearing burqas in public is objected by the Westerners as they see it as a "symbol of subservience" whereas transnational feminist argues that such decisions are "Euro patriarchal notions of femininity and dress" depriving them of free choices.

Further, under close investigation it is observed that the majority of victims of sexual trafficking are women of color who live under vulnerable circumstances; transnational feminism question the bias and privilege emerging from these types of discrimination and marginalization. The activist's actual focus is to organize movements which depicts " sexual liberation with casual sex, nudity, and the reclamation of words that continue to harm and marginalize us — such as slut " Additionally, domestic workers rights and immigration rights are also at taken up as the forefront of transnational feminist activism. Taking the accounts of percentage of transnational women of color living in the United States, it represents the largest number of domestic workers: 46% of them are foreign-born, and 35% are non-citizens :

And while Western feminism has acknowledged that domestic worker protections are a feminist issue, many fail to make a connection between immigration reform, worker's rights, and gender violence throughout the world. It's all about race and class inequalities, and one

cannot be fixed without the other. Transnational feminist organizations ensure that the needs of those marginalized within minority groups are also being met. This is the case for the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, who provide legal services to trans immigrants. It is important to support immigrant communities, but also fighting to stop the US capitalist endeavors in developing countries that make immigration a necessity and not a choice.

Currently, the new groups such as the Zapatistas, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and AF3IRM offer a radically different portrait of so-called “third world women.” – ‘These organizations employ direct revolutionary action and raise consciousness to help women in their current lifestyle, while also fighting the political issues that oppress them.’

“Transnational feminists focus on issues of race, gender, imperialism, economics, human rights, psychology and nationalism.” In 1980s the second wave feminism considered the gender instead of sex for distinguishing between people. Feminist began to outlook such system of gender as changeable process which determines people’s life and behaviors greatly. Second wave feminism “rejected critic of inequality is due to class, race, sex, socioeconomic status, legal status, age, ability and religion”. (Code, L.2006) In case of the indigenous women of colour who are rejected in a count of being third world, have no human rights as their poor, rural, disabled or queer. Another important arena in the translation feminism is race which

deals with “cross cultural interactions histories and migrations”.

Conclusion

Increasingly feminists all over the world have voiced for women’s full empowerment and campaigned actively for the rights from the earlier times itself. Transnational women’s activism propagates against the idea of global feminism and focuses on the feminist activists’ propaganda about women’s changing rights, needs, treatment and impact in the global scenario. The paper briefly has evaluated how transnational feminism considers the notion of race, sexuality, class etc...in addition to the engulfing lens of gender framework. By tracing the development of trans-feminist concerns over the 1960s and 1970s, the chapter offers the basic analysis of the theory to all readers. The themes presented in this introductory paper try to offer an overview of key tenets from feminist transnational practice. Postcolonial feminism originated in the 1980s as a critique of misrepresentation of non-Western countries’ feminism i.e., the feminist theorists argues that the women have universalizing tendencies in the developed countries and across the globe. The chapter appeals to feminist scholars working in a variety of disciplines and offers a wider insight on the nuances. Additionally, this paper positions as a comprehensible study to the students as well as scholars who pursue the topic of transnational feminism.

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