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**The women of the other and us**

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# IDENTITY(IES)

A MULTICULTURAL AND  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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## THE WOMEN OF THE OTHER AND US

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**Abstract:** It is by now a common place in identity theory that the construction of an identity for the individual and collective Self implies and is correlated with the concomitant construction of an Other or of a set of differences that allow for the contouring of the I /We. Yet the analysis and epistemological reflection about these processes of Othering or of producing, interpreting and valuing difference, is far from exhausted, since they are extremely complex, ambiguous versatile, delusive, multidirectional, multilayered and reach from representation and discourse inextricably to social and political practices. Framed by this extremely broad set of questions my paper will focus upon the construction of an understanding of the West that sets itself against its many Others through complex logics that involve cultural, racial, ethnic, religious and national paradigms, but are moreover deeply sexualized. Indeed, it seems that Western thought, knowledge and politics, both in their more conservative patriarchal and in their more progressive feminist models, and in ideological stances that can be segregationist or solidary in their intentions, need to create an Other that will invariably be evoked as a non-sexualized block or referred to as a generalizing male norm, but that in fact almost always involves the simultaneous creation

of the Other of this Other: the non-western Woman, or the Woman of the Rest. The word “rest” will express here the many ways in which these women are in fact pushed back to the ultimate layer of crossed processes of Othering that condemn them to silence and invisibility both within their cultures and as instruments of Western identity and “real” politics.<sup>48</sup>

**Keywords:** Muslim Women; Islam; Colonialism

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”

(Mohanty, 1988)

“When you don’t even feel you have to listen to the voices of the people whose cause you’re championing, it’s a reasonable indication of the fact that this has less to do with them than with you”

(Hussain, 2013)

Let me start my article with these two quotes. The first is are two well-known Marx sentences that Indian feminist theoretician Chandra Mohanty uses to conclude her 1988 article, titled “Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses”, which deals with the way non-western women are represented both in western humanist and in feminist discourse. The second comes from an article published in a US-based news site named Salon.com, in

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<sup>48</sup> Another version of this article will be published in a collection of articles that honors the work of Maria Irene Ramalho, one of the main mentors of my studies in feminism.

which a political analyst called Murtaza Hussain (2013) discussed the appropriation of Malala Yousafzai's struggle against the Taliban by anti-Islam crusaders. These ignore the Pakistani activist's own statements concerning her religious and cultural identity and convert her into an icon in favor of so-called western values. This, the author argues, contradicts 14-year old Malala Yousafzai's repeated and vehement claims that her combat for the education of girls is rooted upon Islam and Pashtun culture:

The Taliban think we are not Muslims, but we are. We believe in God more than they do, and we trust him to protect us... I'm still following my own culture, Pashtun culture... Islam says that it is not only each child's right to get education, rather it is their duty and responsibility. (Yousafzai, as cited in Hussain, 2013)

It is evident that we must admire and support Malala. However, like Hussain points out, we must ask ourselves if our way of championing her cause is actually true to its objectives. The fact that Malala's words are often unheard as opposed to the discourse that underlines how she was saved by the West and how her story is an example of what a barbaric culture is capable of may well be prejudicial to her and her companions of struggle. This discourse not only arrogantly ignores Malala's better knowledge of the context she lives in, but also places her in an unsustainable position within a representation of her own culture that she obviously doesn't share. We are putting Malala up against herself when we uncritically let expressions of generalized perceptions of Islam modeled upon the Taliban to be spread, such as:

Given the requisite beliefs... an entire culture will support such evil. Malala is the best thing to come out of the Muslim world in a thousand years. She is an extraordinarily brave and eloquent

girl who is doing what millions of Muslim men and women are too terrified to do—stand up to the misogyny of traditional Islam. (cited by Hussain, 2013)

Hussain (2013) notes:

Although Malala may claim to be a devout Muslim acting in accordance with Islam, this is merely an inconvenient detail that can be safely ignored. It's simply another expression of the naked ignorance and fear of the brown, Muslim hordes on the other side of the Earth...

The debates over the Muslim veil or all the different kinds of clothing Muslim women cover their bodies with are perhaps since 9/11 one of the most evident expressions of this process of Othering – and one that has its focal point on women. I am thinking, for instance, of the *burqa* as the most powerful icon of women's oppression in popular public discourse, in politics and juridical measures in the West, since the US and their allies adopted the politics and rhetoric of “War on Terrorism”. Within this frame of representations the “women of cover”, as Muslim women were designated in US President Bush's speeches (Abu-Lughod, 2002), have a male counterpart: the bearded dark-skinned terrorist modelled upon Bin Laden or the Taliban. Both icons complement each other and are not accidentally gendered. Indeed it is their sexual identity that sustains their distinct roles in the difference that is construed in relation to the West: the man is supposed to be object of our hatred, since he personifies the barbarism and savagery of a tradition or culture that is represented as ahistorical and unchangeable by definition and that poses a threat “to the world as we know it”; the woman will be the object of our sympathy, especially because she is presented as the main victim of the iconic Islamic male. The fact

that the “covered” Muslim woman is not a menace reveals the extent to which these women are completely reduced to the category of objects, denied the capacity of free thought, agency and voice. In fact, they do not exist beyond their iconic function which does not serve a better knowledge of the Other but power assertion by the West through a representation that reinforces a discourse of western civilizational superiority.<sup>49</sup>

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) analyses how popular American media broadcasts turned the politically complex Afghanistan affair into a question of “culture” and “religion”, whose explanation depended crucially on the “Muslim woman”. She is stricken by the reasons why “these female symbols” and their “liberation” were mobilized in the context of the “War on Terrorism”, in order to feed cultural divides. According to Abu-Lughod, the speeches of First Lady Laura Bush

... collapsed important distinctions that should have been maintained. There was a constant slippage between the Taliban and the terrorists, so that they became almost one word – a kind of hyphenated monster identity: the Taliban-and-the terrorists. Then there was the blurring of the very separate causes in Afghanistan of women’s continuing malnutrition, poverty and ill-

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<sup>49</sup> This process has been profoundly strengthened most recently with the terrorist attacks of ISIS (the so-called Islamic state) in France and the ban not only of the *burka* but of its derivations, like the *burkini*, an item of clothing that was banned from several beaches by some French municipalities in the name of French values – such as laicity, but also freedom. Muslim women were forced to uncliothe by armed men in an extreme manifestation of this process of construction of the Self and the Other that, in this case, enacts France and the narrative core of its national identity (*liberté, fraternité, solidarité*) as itself the icon of the West against the Rest (which is made to be simplistically the opposite of this core values). That using arms to force women to wear or not to wear a certain piece of clothing is not understood as a form of oppression fits into a discursive confrontation in which women are handled as voiceless objects, their clothing as civilizational icons, and their bodies as the territory of a cultural divide that is disputed by males. The analysis of the most recent developments of this debate are the current object of my work and cannot yet be dealt with in this article.

-health, and their more recent exclusion under the Taliban from employment and schooling, and the joys of wearing nail polish. (2002: 783-4)

The public addresses by the American and also the British First Ladies never mentioned the political history that had led to Taliban rule, including over a quarter of a century of US and other interventions in the region. Instead they used simplistic rhetoric strategies such as the conflation between the Taliban, the terrorists and Islam, and the creation of “chasmic” divides between these “monsters” and the civilized world. Isis, the so-called Islamic State, and its widely broadcasted savage practices have become the prevailing representations of Islam in the media and political discourse, which led to an almost hegemonic perception of Islam as homogeneous and overall barbaric. This discourse is rapid to erase the implications of Western interventions in the Middle East since the Iraq war or even before that. Rather, this amputated and distorted representation of Islam is constructed as the origin of the very need of Western intervention in Syria and elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> As Abu-Lughod points out:

Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked artificially to divide the world into separate spheres – recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas. (2002: 784)

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<sup>50</sup> As I said before, this article cannot yet reflect deeply the most recent developments that would sustain my argument. However, I will just point out that the response of French Prime Minister François Hollande to the Paris terrorist attacks in 2016 was an indiscriminate bombing action in Syria that occurred parallel to the internal discourse on the oppression of women by Islam.



Other practices that are highly publicized in the West as being intrinsic or essential to Islam or other non-western cultures, Asian or African, are, for instance, polygamy, child marriage, crimes of honor and dilapidation – no matter how circumscribed they may actually be. News about young children being raped to death in their wedding night in Yemen or campaigns by human rights organizations to prevent the dilapidation of women in Nigeria, for example, are very frequent in the media and social networks. They are most frequently succinct in the presentation of the matter and rely on sensationalism. As well-meant such campaigns and petitions may be, they may also have prejudicial effects, mainly because they do not take into account the complex social, political, cultural and subjective factors at stake and ignore the efforts and opinions of local women's organizations. Indeed most of these well-meaning campaigns fail because they are based on presuppositions of what the Muslim or the African woman need and want and, again, do not care to listen to those whose cause they are championing.

In fact, in 2013 we still seem to be dealing with the colonial political dynamics Mohanty identifies in western discourses about non-western women, which paternalistically take for granted – and let me go back to my first quote – that “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (Mohanty, 1988: 82). In her analysis Third World women are produced as a “singular monolithic subject” (1988: 61). The heterogeneity and materiality of their life stories, their subject status and their voice are discursively and politically suppressed. According to Mohanty, through a relation of structural domination, Third World women are reduced to icons of, as she puts it, “the third world difference’ – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries” (1988: 64). This kind of “ethnocentric universalism” (1988: 64) is the mark of the colonial power of “any discourse”, including the feminist, “that sets up its own authorial subjects as

the implicit referent, i.e., the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others” (1988: 64). Again, it is the West we are talking about when the women of the Rest are basically seen as nothing but victims:

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This (...) is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions. (...) These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent”. (Mohanty, 1988: 65)

We must add to this that the contrasting representation of western and non-western women has its correlation in the conception of a “good” western man that is able to live with women on equal terms, and a “bad” non-western man that embodies gender oppression.

Indeed, what is at stake here is a play of discourse that is very close to what became known as “colonial feminism”. Gayatri Spivak (1988) denounces the use of the woman question in British colonial policies concerning sati (the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres) in order to legitimate rule, by, as she puts it, having “white men saving brown women from brown men”. Leila Ahmed (1992) describes at length how the dispute around the Islamic veil originated historically in a colonial dispute between males in the context of the British colonial occupation of Egypt. Women are thus instrumental in rhetorical strategies that pose as ethical missions but actually legitimate imperialistic politics. Moreover, as Uma Narayan (1998) points out, another process of

subalternization can be added to this when non-western women also function as symbols of their own essentialised tradition in the dominant discourses of political affirmation of their own nations or communities, and become instruments of patriarchal nationalist or culturalist projects that are oppressive to them. The consequences of these processes are several and affect the West, the Rest and the Women of the Rest.

As I have been suggesting all along, the rhetoric on the Other is always more about the Self. By producing difference, the West is actually reinforcing its identity and position of superiority in a hierarchy of civilization. The identity of the Self, like that of the Other, is a construction that obeys political interests in specific historical moments and materializes in narratives that arrange the past and the present as is suitable. These constructions also manage to appear as real pre-givens and hide its construed character and to cohabit with the opposite of their own identity narrative. As Narayan points out:

The colonial self-portrait of 'Western culture' had (...) only a faint resemblance to the moral, political and cultural values that *actually pervaded* life in Western societies. Thus liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic 'Western values', hallmarks of its civilizational superiority, at the very moment when Western nations were engaged in slavery, colonization, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of Western subjects, including women. (1998): 89-90)

Today, for instance, while the discourse of the defense of human rights is spoken out loud to justify military interventions in Arab countries – military interventions in which the West poses as savior –, more rigid policies are drawn that condemn immigrants and

refugees to death in the Mediterranean Ocean. The ban on the Muslim veil in public spaces in France or the *burkini* issue are both part of a campaign to “free” Muslim women from gender and cultural oppression and part of the liberal discourse on the supposed neutrality of the State. This same discourse however intentionally selects and produces difference when only this piece of clothing, and no other religious symbol, is considered transgressive of laity as an intrinsic trace of the French Republic, that is, of French national identity, and when it reinforces an idea of “cleanliness” from alien cultural expressions in the public space while tolerating gender oppression in the private sphere (such as polygamy amongst immigrant groups, which was allowed until too much pressure was exercised by polygamous families upon French social aid services) (Narayan, 1998). As was the case in the historical beginning of colonialism, the West builds a narrative of the Self that erases internal heterogeneities, which might otherwise be perceived as enriching, and reaffirms a unified identity which has a single color of skin, obeys a single paradigm of religious faith and still has patriarchy as its norm. The discourse on the Other also contributes to reinforce national identities based on the notion of a pure “Volk” and to replace possible class solidarities with xenophobia in a context of strong social inequalities. Indeed, the production of difference is beginning to threaten the European project by creating divides between a center that pursues politics and rhetoric in relation to peripheral countries that have typical traits of colonial discourse. Not surprisingly this discourse is also gendered and includes the supposedly typical behavior of the southern European Mediterranean male towards their women, namely concerning domestic violence and the exploitation of female work.

Within this dichotomic frame of thought there is no room for an understanding of the Self and of the Other that takes into account not only the heterogeneities, discontinuities and historical change on both

sides of the divide, but also their complex encounters and relations which, in reality, build a continuum of ambiguous, multidirectional and multilayered interconnections. This is a hegemony building process that in fact contradicts all the most benevolent discourses and practices and ends up preventing intercultural dialogue and multicultural integration. The reinforcement of narratives of cultural blocks, whose identity is transferred to an ahistorical and therefore unchangeable sphere, colored with ideas of originality and authenticity that actually cover up their deeply contextual character, also deepens internal inequalities, by presenting other sources of oppression, such as class or gender, as secondary when compared to racial, ethnic, religious or cultural threats. Women and the poor in the West are forgotten when the line of conflict is displaced to the border between the Self and the cultural Other. Indeed, gender-based oppression in the West is often not even perceived as such, when oppression is defined according to the social practices of the Other, and western Women are elected as models of emancipation (despite all the violence and inequalities they are still subject to).

Last but not least, the women of the Rest become the subaltern of the subaltern in this chain of discursive construction of differences. Although they apparently occupy the first place in western preoccupations, they serve merely to demonstrate the barbarism of the Other and Western civilizational superiority, and to legitimate the redemptive role of the West – a strategy of imperialistic domination. The reduction to an object status denies the actual women not only agency but also the expression of subjective aspirations and desires, which may well include the wish to live within the cultural and religious references that give them a sense of identity, or the will to transform these references in a sense that they alone are able to determine, without paternalistic guidance by the hegemonic powers of the West, western feminists, or men of their own communities. The iconic representations that hide what they are supposed to

show also render invisible these women's capacity of developing adequate means of resistance to what they recognize as violence, oppression and need. Therefore, the perception of the women of the Rest as eternal victims is still an obstacle even for progressive transnational feminism, which has difficulties in engaging dialogues with individuals and in listening to them as subjects in their own rights, without the filter of essentialist constructions of their culture. Indeed, even when we engage in common combats for fundamental human rights such as freedom and equality, we do not easily understand that these no longer respond to a western conceptual normative and have been appropriated by different collectives in many geographical and historical contexts in distinct battles against diverse inequalities (Narayan, 1998). To go back to the example I first mentioned, we in the West are generally reluctant to acknowledge that Muslim women may find it possible – and often find it wishful – to live in freedom and equality within Islam. This is what admirable human rights activists such as Malala Yousafzai tell us, or what Islamic feminists affirm – Islamic feminism being considered an oxymoron in Western contexts. As Abu-Lughod argues, if we care to listen to the women of the Rest, we will discover

... not that Muslim women are in fact carefree, but that their lives are as diverse and complicated as *all* lives are, and that when we make facile and unfounded judgments about culture's role in those complications we forestall consideration of any actually effective strategies for playing an appropriate role in their alleviation. (Abu-Lughod cited by Hussain, 2013)

Solidarities are in fact needed but only those that are capable to transcend all kinds of essentialisms and consider the individuals in the specificities of their material existences. As Spivak (1988) claims, we should not try to represent these women, but create room for

their voices to be heard. When and wherever possible we should put an unbiased microphone in front of them. That's what I tried to do here.

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