

What's In A Name?: Seeing Feminism, Universalism, and Modernity

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Zillah Eisenstein

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Women's rights activists have claimed—and disowned—the label “feminist.” This article revisits old questions in feminist discourse and probes what feminism(s) mean today for women across the globe. It explores the possibility of a polyversal feminism which expresses women's potential humanity and moves beyond divisions. The plural acts of resistance to Empire are neither western or non-western. Women activists are encouraged to radically pluralize, rather than liberally pluralize the concept of feminism.

I start with the difficulty of finding language to describe the past 30 some years of women's activism and struggle for equality, freedom, liberation, and social justice. In the early 1970's in the u.s. feminists of all stripes spoke of women's rights or liberation; reform or revolution.[1] Although civil rights and anti-vietnam war activists initiated much of what was called feminism at the time, the mainstreamed women's movement was predominantly white and middle class. There were women activists across much of the globe through this time period—in algeria, iran, egypt, south africa, and so on—but their politics were often subsumed under the language of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, by themselves and 'the' west. Feminism came to be identified with 'the' west; by 'the' west. So, today, in the midst of economic and cultural globalization by 'the' west I want to ask whether feminism is any more western than it is Africana or Islamic.

My understanding of feminism and its commitments continue to change as more and more women's lives take on new visibility. By the end of the '70's in the u.s. black and latina feminists played a crucial role in critically pluralizing the meanings of feminism beyond the liberal individualism of the white women's movement. For the first two decades feminism of 'the' west was pluralized to its different socialist, anarchist, cultural, liberal, lesbian, environmental, radical, black, agendas. Such naming seemed necessary, but also created false borders because most identities are multiple and bleed into one another. A black feminist can also always be a socialist, or lesbian or...or... At this time there was little mention of Islamic feminism here at home; and little recognition of the feminisms abroad.

At this juncture feminists were trying to delineate the differences among feminism. Feminism became pluralized although the language often did not. Anti-racist feminists began to use these differences to see a larger collectivity and inclusivity for the name 'women'. Black feminists like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and bell hooks were crucial to this process. Despite the

conservative Reagan-Bush decade of the '80's anti-racist feminists of many sorts worked at articulating a more honest viewing of women as a sexual class, although divided by economic class, race, and sexual preference. In this context feminism in 'the' west named and made visible the oppression of women, as women, despite their differences of privilege.

Early on I identified as a socialist feminist to distinguish myself from the mainstreamed liberal movement. Then came the revolutions of '89 and eastern european women's indictment of the misuses of feminism by so-called socialist states. Socialist feminist no longer felt like an effective identity. I started to just say I was a feminist. But then I also felt that anti-racism needed to be specified if feminism were to not be assumed to be white and western. Given the new excesses of global capital I am tempted to start using socialist alongside anti-racist again. My process of naming has been a process of seeing women differently, and more inclusively. And, my viewing from 'the' west may be slower and less total than women from elsewhere where colonialism has demanded that they know more and see more. Hegemony of and by 'the' west appropriates and narrows vision.

At the same time, however, the globe is put in view in spite of western attempts to homogenize cultures. This viewing has now opened a lens on feminism to other global expressions, besides western. The U. N. sponsored Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, mobilized the various women's movements around the world and put them in fuller view than ever before. Islamic feminists had been reading the Qur'an in non-patriarchal ways for at least a decade before the conference. The terrorist attack of Sept. 11 brought feminisms in Islam into fuller view for activist feminists in the u.s. For others in the u.s. and parts of the global west, the aftermath of Sept. 11 presented a universalized notion of feminism as western, and positioned against the backwardness of Islam. Islam was equated with the terrorism of bin Laden and the Taliban. The plight of afghan women was put center stage: the denial of their right to work, to be educated, to receive health care. The enforced wearing of the burqa symbolized their lack of human rights. President Bush wrapped his bombs in this discourse of women's rights.

This moment is where my present querying takes off. Given this complex context I need to revisit some very old questions, but hopefully with new ways of seeing. What does feminism(s) mean today for women across the globe? How diversely can feminism be named and still seen? Has the west simply claimed feminism as their own, or is there something deeply western about feminism? How does the west undermine feminism? What are the other-than-western cores of feminism?[2] Is there a polyversal core--a universal idea with local expressions--to feminisms across the globe? Does the english status of the word, feminism, negate its polyversality? If language makes things visible in the first place we need a language which speaks the need of women for the self-determination of their bodies and minds, and which recognizes power-differentials amongst us..

My queries necessitate that women activists radically pluralize, rather than liberally pluralize the concept of feminism. This means that differences will not be ordered hierarchically against a

privileged singular standard; or set up oppositionally against each other, or reflective of powerful privilege. A difference will then simply express variety and can be earnestly challenged as such.[3] This also means that there will be a variety of ways that women's equality, and freedom, and justice are expressed and defended; as long as self-determination—which encompasses individual choices and access (equality) to them exists as part of this process.

As I begin this journey I know that feminisms are not simply western, nor non-western, but embrace women everywhere. West and non-west are not true geographical, cultural, or political categories to begin with. From the start there have always been flows between empires and their colonies, between colonizer and colonized, between slave and slave-master, between colors of the skin. The mix has been misrepresented as separateness and opposition.

Feminism has suffered from this overdrawn divide palpably. It has been wrongly homogenized as a unity, and then defined as of the west. This negates multiple forms of feminisms in the west AND the multiple forms of feminisms outside the west. As such feminisms lose their plurality of meanings which also express the similarities among women. A polyversal feminism—multiple and connected—expresses women's potential humanity which does not recognize irreconcilable divides. When women are subordinated and not allowed the lives they wish to live they respond with resistance. The plural acts of resistance are neither western or non-western. They are what women do to survive and thrive in polyversal fashion.

What's In A Name?

Feminism belongs to anyone who has fought for or died in the struggle to improve the lot of women. As such, no one simply owns its meaning. Naming acknowledges the thing named so that it can be seen. Naming also expresses the power of those who get to name. Toni Morrison in *Beloved* writes: "Definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined".[4] Feminism names the site of women's oppression as visible. There are differing notions of what oppression means, yet 'feminism' gives coherence to the variety. So women in the west need to multiply the versions/visions of women's oppression and liberation; and find multiple ways to express the varieties of feminisms.

To the extent that english is a white woman's language it also expresses white women's identities.. This does not mean that many white women would never claim the term, nor does it mean that many women of color do not utilize it all the time. However, it is also more complex than this. Black women have been uncomfortable with the term—given its racist history, its exclusionary focus privileging white women, their own multiple oppressions which made its singularity feel too narrow, and the hostility towards it by black men as a white woman's thing. Jill Nelson, who often does identify as feminist also says that although naming is important, so "is anonymity and adroit warfare". She says black women know "the efficacy of stealth", of "communicating indirectly", of the "amazing art of passing on information via metaphor" as spirituals do.[5]

Women activists in Egypt in the early 20th century like Huda Shaarawi had no term that directly translated into 'feminist'. In 1949, Inji Aflatun argued that "the enemies of women are the enemies of democracy". Women's struggle is to strengthen democracy in Egypt.[6] What does it mean to translate plural meanings into one term, that is not home grown? The term feminism—its racist and colonialist past—limits its ability to embrace all the complexities of women's lives across the globe. If feminism means the willingness to both recognize and subordinate our differences while recognizing the inequalities of power that divide us, a language that expresses this is crucial.[7] We, the big 'we', need an identity chosen from women's present struggles that does this. This will be more-than-a-westernized anti-racist feminism. De-westernized does not mean less focus on the gendered oppressions of women's lives, but it means more focus on denuding the global west of its cultural dominance and economic appropriation.

It is important to recognize that although feminism has a troubled history and incomplete understanding of the complexities always also defining sex and gender oppression, it is also true that many employ the term and give it new and insurgent meanings all the time. It is impossible to control and limit the radical dimensions of feminism as it is practiced by women across the globe.[8] The trick is to not assume that you know the limits and meanings of the particular feminist practice until you investigate it. This means that women from different places and cultures must remain open to new meanings of feminism, just as we ask feminists to see our particular and plural meanings of selfhood. I will argue that feminism is no more static an identity, than religion or politics, or culture. It is its changeability that invigorates feminisms' possibilities for human liberation.

Is Feminism Western or Modern?

The language of politics—democracy, socialism, modernity, civilization itself—is deciphered in relation to the economic system. Bourgeois liberalism articulates the relations of capitalism; socialism writes its critique. Conservatism embraces preservation of the economy. Terms like western and modernity usually bespeak the levels of economic bourgeois development. Women's lives are most often depoliticized as private and not public, and stand outside the contours of this language. Strangely enough, women however remain the symbolic of nationhood. Women's bodies are clothed to represent the status of the nation: chadors, burqas, saris, mini-skirts, spiked heels, make-up, face-lifts, etc. Non-modern dress, read as non-western, is a sign of backwardness or underdevelopment. Modernity exposes the woman's body. The more the body is revealed, the more modern. The more that sexuality is spoken, the more modern. Yet, rich and poor countries alike suffer domestic violence, rape, and unwanted pregnancies.

This is where anti-racist feminisms enter. They put women's and girl's lives in full view as part of the matrix of oppression. Societies that have rape and domestic violence are non-modern

whether they have sweat shops filled with teenage girls or not. Rape camps during the Bosnian War should have put serbs on the same par with the Taliban—rape is no more modern than enforced seclusion. The enforced prostitution of women in South-East Asia and the Pacific by the Japanese military during WW II bespeaks woman as the horrific 'other'. She is not a part of the society, but merely serves it as sex slave. Human rights feminists had been working to put this on the agenda for years.

These women, often called 'comfort women' by the Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War during 1931-45, were rounded up and imprisoned in brothels to give comfort to military men. As one officer of the Army Corps justifies the practice: "This desire [for sex] is the same as hunger or the need to urinate, and soldiers merely thought of comfort stations as practically the same as latrines".[9] These young women from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, China, Korea, and Burma, were forced to service military men's needs. Their continued rape, confinement and physical abuse, was a grave violation of their human rights which combined sexual violence against women, racism, and discrimination against the poor.[10]

Rape camps are as inhuman and 'backward' as a nation can get. In this context what does it mean to call the Taliban backward? Given the systematic rape of slave women in the U.S.—seen in the hue of lightened colors today—how should one define western modernity? There is nothing simple about clarifying the erasure of women's lives, nor their complexity. In Rwanda, 1994, the slaughter and rape of hundreds of thousands of women was done by ordinary people wielding machetes. And many in these civilian mobs were women.[11]

Given the clouding of women's lives and struggles by political discourse itself it becomes even more troublesome to subsume feminism under terms like 'western', or 'modern', or 'democratic'. The conflation of feminism into western liberalism is rooted in an earlier collapsing of the variety of U.S. feminisms—like socialist, anarchist, radical, black, Latina—into liberal feminism. Liberal feminism parades as one and the same with mainstream feminism: the rights of women to equality in law and property. Liberal feminism demands that women have the opportunity to achieve their wishes, and not be ascribed to a sexual status beforehand. The individual woman wins out against the homogenization of her as simply a member of a sexual caste. The other forms of feminisms in the global west are silenced in this equation except for what I term "feminism for export".[12]

Feminism's possibilities are de-radicalized and as such become a marketing device of first-world markets. Glitzy advertisements of women fantasize the freedom of the west. Beautiful, healthy, fashionable women become images for the promise of democracy. Women of the west are exported to the rest of the global 'community' as either porn stars or CEO's. Meanwhile a majority of the women across the globe—inside and outside the west—are living and working harder and wishing for equality and freedom. Mass marketing of the dream turns feminist individuality into a consumerist self-help market. The radical possibilities of feminism are continually re-captured; away from struggles for equality and vaporized.

It is also necessary to recognize that the same exploitative system of global capital that newly oppresses women and girls in sweat-shop labor, prostitution, and cyber-systems of power, also makes women more visible across the globe. As former divisions between home and work; women and men, public and private are challenged, patriarchal controls are exposed in new fashion. The consumerist culture of capitalism undermines masculinist privilege over women as well. So although global capital, as such, is no friend to women and girls it unsettles existing gender relations in ways that it cannot simply control. In this sense global capital is tremendously contradictory: it promises freedom and riches to the very people it exploits and degrades. Global capitalism exposes women to new levels of exploitation and also instigates new yearnings that cannot be easily dismissed as bourgeois. These yearnings rather endorse their own local feminist desires, some of which are resistant to globalization, and some of which embrace its promissory of freedom for all.

Liberal feminism as it was articulated in the 19th century stood as a critique of the exclusion of white women from the bourgeois revolution overtaking England and France. These women wanted the new freedoms being promised white propertied men. In order to claim these rights they first had to see that they were excluded as a sexual caste, as a homogenized collective with no individuality. They then used this ascribed status to challenge the engendered exclusivity of bourgeois right. These feminists did not speak of slave women or slaves in general. They did not speak of non-propertied women. They instead utilized the abstract/inclusive promissory of individual rights and demanded it exclusively for themselves. This radical—though incomplete—moment has long since passed.

In 1981 I wrote that “all feminism is liberal at its root in that the universal feminist claim that woman is an independent being (from man) is premised on the 18th century liberal conception of the independent and autonomous self.” I also stated that all feminism “is radically feminist in that woman’s identity as a member of a sex class underlies this claim”.[13] I now think it is more true to say that all feminism recognizes woman’s independence/autonomy but that there are more-than-liberal formulations of this idea, some of which see more connectedness to others than the bourgeois formula of individualism. There are other notions of individuality that are not simply at one with bourgeois individualism.

Seeing the individual, as such, with rights which are positioned against others, or in tension with the collectivity, has been hegemonized by the west for the west. Africana-womanism and Islamic feminism embrace a more social notion of the individual.

Individuality can recognize autonomy from and connection to others simultaneously; and when one chooses, one can act individually while also recognizing these obligations. This sense of self is interconnected with others, although the self is also independent. This reading of the self is not simply western; this feminist self has its roots/routes from elsewhere where slavery and colonialism have demanded more of the individual than selfish desire, but also more than

selflessness. Connectedness and autonomy are not oppositional stances as they so often have been in bourgeois and socialist theory. Feminisms blend and bleed across and through west and nonwest; bourgeois and socialist, individualist and collectivist. Feminisms which have developed through these crossroads have a richer blending than feminisms of the west..

For me, I must retain the self as 'free' even though this construct is so often collapsed into its commodified, selfish form. I wish to make freedom less selfish, but remain committed to it as a necessary aspect of our diverse humanity. Individual freedom allows us our differences and uniqueness. This embrace of the self targets the freedom of choice about what happens to your body, your mind, your life. The freedom of the self, the freedom to choose allows for the possibility of resistance which is crucial to creativity. Freedom is marketed much more aggressively in the west than equality; feminisms in the west are much better at demanding freedom than equality. But equality must also be part of the equation or freedoms cannot be actualized. Freedom to choose must be accompanied with the possibility of getting your choices. So, although freedom with its bourgeois exclusiveness is not sufficient, we must work to equalize our freedoms so that they matter more for more people. Equality, then, allows us to recognize our similarity while freedom celebrates our multiplicity. This is why feminisms must struggle for both.

Both equality and freedom need to be articulated carefully in the ways that women's gender, and race, and class, and sexuality continually construct identity. So it is not enough to have economic or legal equality without equality of sexuality and sexual differences along with the racial diversity that is spoken here. It is also true that given all this multiplicity it is not necessary that all feminists agree on all counts in order to build feminisms across the globe. These points of contact are yet to be discovered.

Meanwhile any dialogue today confronts the hegemony of western feminism, whatever this really means. As parts of the liberal feminist discourse have been appropriated by global capital and neoliberals it becomes harder for feminists to sort out what it once meant, and what it means today. Through the mid-'70's and '80's mainstream feminism began to take more radical stands to include more women. As it tried to be more inclusive—Bella Abzug is a perfect example of one who chose to push the limits of electoral politics for women as far as possible—a backlash began against this increased inclusivity. Mainstream feminism—liberal and radical--was said to have lost touch with the women it was supposed to be helping. Neo-liberals, many of whom were women, wished to conservatize the demands of feminists. Under assault in the Reagan-Bush decade feminist activism began to dissipate. We entered the stage of: "I am not a feminist, but..."

This is not meant as a white-wash of the mainstream movement and its lackings. But it is also true that liberal feminism has been denuded of much of its initial radicalism. Today western feminism must be distinguished in terms of its parts: a neoliberal/neoconservative feminist discourse of the u.s. government and transnational capital; a liberal feminist equal rights agenda inside the u.s. as well as other countries; a vocal human rights discourse publicized through the

U.N.; a colonialist feminist voice often at odds with other feminisms across the globe; and a set of liberatory discourses which other feminist struggles interact and mix with. We must be very cautious at this moment in history when powerful voices choose to collapse these complexities. It is out of this complexity that radically pluralist feminist dialogues can develop. Women in the west, and women outside the west; women of the non-west living in the west; and women of the west living in the non-west must become more creative with these dialogues.

We, the big 'we', should not forget that many of the women living in the west, are not of the west, in terms of geographical origin. Yet women live and interact with the culture of the west with and alongside their home cultures. And women of the west seek out cultures other than their own in order to live in the world more diversely. So who is a western woman today? And who is a woman from elsewhere? Is this question all that different from wondering what the cultural flows back and forth between colonizer and colonized; slave and slave master were in the 18th and 19th centuries? The differences will allow us to find out where we have traveled and come to, without erasing history, or being limited to its confines. These are the new-old queries for feminisms across the globe in 2002.

Is the Universal Uni or Poly?

It has never been more important than to critically rethink the contours of the meaning of 'universal', and pluralize it to other-than-its western form. If universal is understood as unity it by definition becomes exclusionary of the very thing it is to embrace—totality. Universality is simply an abstracted viewing of humanity when it is articulated by the powerful, for themselves. It is why 18th century enlightenment theorists could write of the humanity of all, the freedom and equality of all, and really mean white propertied men. For them, no one was excluded. The abstraction they gave us—of all—of any individual—remains a gift of promise for all those excluded. But it also raises the question of whether one can ever get to a true inclusivity while treating 'the' individual in its abstracted form. The abstract metaphor—the individual—makes it possible to misname and mis-see the totality, as one and the same with oneself.

Supposedly we are being inclusive, and democratic, and modern, when we speak of universal rights. These rights are human rights; humanely given to any one who is human. As such they are said to be natural rights. They are available to any one who chooses to claim them. Of course, these visions were written by men like I. Kant, and J. J. Rousseau, who never spoke against the slave trade, or on behalf of women's freedom or equality. Rousseau is well known for writing the dilemma of *The Social Contract*, that men were born free and everywhere they are in chains. But his men who were born free were white, not black slaves. And the men chained were not black, but white.

Given the political history of exclusion, in the name of universal rights, I argue that the universal must be reinvented through specificity in order to democratize the very idea of universalism. If universal rights had been written with the site of specificity of the black man and woman in the

18th century, the human right to freedom would have been envisioned more totally at the start. If today we write the universal with women's bodies in their polyversal diversity for their actual needs for food, and shelter, and love, and education, and interesting lives, we move toward a greater totality of humanity. The universal is specific and multiple; or as the Bengali theorists argue, "unity in diversity".

Specificity—especially of differences—wins out every time over abstracted humanism which can be read from the site of power as oneness. Human as a term is already encoded with the colonialist's exclusiveness. Yet human rights is thought to be a more inclusive construct than women's rights. All feminist U.N. dialogue states that 'women's rights are human rights'. And I wonder, why humanism is thought to be more inclusive than an anti-racist feminism? Human rights are women's rights, if not more so. When women's rights are met men's rights will also be met; and this is less true stated the other way around. Humanity speaks the shared, and alike, part of life between men and women. They share their humanness and their derivative rights as such. Women's rights also connotes the specific needs women may have (that men do not) given the unequal relations of power between them. As such, women's rights become the more inclusive starting point—they specify and unify; women's rights address the shared human likeness and the distinct uniqueness of different needs. A health system which provides women with pre-natal and pregnancy care will provide an inclusive program for men and women. Men are not disabled in this framework, as pregnant women are today in our legal system which is written from a masculinist standard of universality and disability. Inclusivity derives here from plural diversity, at the core. And this diversity will put sites of powerlessness in view for those who see themselves as the universal.

It is interesting to me that when Martha Nussbaum argues for a cross-cultural notion of humanness, she adopts the liberal notion of universalism. She calls for a universal accounting of human capabilities as shared even though she recognizes the need of a universalism that is sensitive to plural and cultural differences. For her pluralism and respect for difference are themselves universal values, yet they also remain liberal in her mind. My query is whether these values are in and of themselves liberal, or western, or simply human and therefore defined richly and polyversally within several traditions. She says we need a universalist feminism, an abstracted promissory of oneness which is understood as liberal.[14] But what does diversity of implementation mean if the starting point premises a oneness of unity.

Carol Quillen interrogates Nussbaum's project. She sees much of Nussbaum's proposals as eurocentric; that she does not recognize the tension between "european humanism and european imperialism". Whereas Nussbaum seems bound by the liberal humanist tradition, Quillen asks for an "other-than-liberal humanist" project. Western humanism is one and the same with european domination and racist and colonialist practices.[15] Without wondering such things it becomes quite risky to think that others should be "free like me". Emancipation is thought to lead to the west—away from Islam, or anywhere elsewhere. Nussbaum needs to take the promissory of liberal humanism but interrogate it to try and find a non-colonialist humanity in

polyversal form that can retrieve humanism for really liberatory feminisms.

Nussbaum thinks that “any universalism” which has a chance of succeeding in the “modern” world must be a “form of political liberalism”. She herself acknowledges that cultures are mixes and not homogenous; that “plurality, contestation and individual variety” exist within all cultures, along with overlap and borrowing.[16] So how does she decipher what she terms ‘political liberalism’; as well as disconnect it from the mix of other influences of which it is a part? Nussbaum either does not see other-than-liberal notions of humanism as promissory, or her anglocentrism simply allows her to claim that liberal humanism is a universal. For me, the uni is poly at the start.

Nussbaum privileges the notion of humanity as the universal especially when she writes of women’s rights. She says that her volume is “not really about women at all but about human beings and about women seen as fully human”. But it is this very discourse of humanity that has excluded women from their rights, as not men, as not white. She authorizes her discussion of feminism by saying her feminism is humanism, i.e., more inclusive than just women.[17] Why this deference to huMAN? Why not say that the book is not about an abstracted universal humanism, but rather a specified way of seeing humanity through the lives of its women. Nussbaum herself repeatedly makes the case, as many others at the U.N. and World Bank do, that if you improve the lives of women, you improve the lives of everyone, that women’s countries develop in proportion to their education, participation, etc. What better way to see that whatever humanism is, it is to be found in its women, and the way they take care of more than themselves.

Amartya Sen says very similar things to Nussbaum. “The voice of women is critically important for the world’s future—not just for women’s future”.[18] According to Sen, women’s empowerment through education, property rights, and employment will reduce fertility rates and promote female literacy. Better women, and better their nations. This quite starkly is not said about men. This is quite an incredible recognition: that there is something about women that when they are allowed to develop, they take others with them. As such, they are human and humanity is its women.

Although it is repeatedly stated that if you improve women’s lives, you improve the country as a whole, there is little discussion of this startling fact. A recent World Bank study states that “countries which promote women’s rights and increase their access to resources and schooling enjoy lower poverty rates, faster economic growth and less corruption than countries who do not.” As such, the report continues: “Gender inequality hurts all members of society, not just girls and women”.[19] So what is it about women that when their lives improve the lives of the community improve, in ways that is not true for men? This question begs one to look inside the interconnectedness of female autonomy to possibly see more-than-a-liberal view of humanism. Several expressions of Africana womanism are helpful here.

Nussbaum attempts to redefine universalism in radically plural ways but rather universalizes liberal pluralism in its western form. I find this perplexing given that she argues that feminism should become less insular, and more international, more attentive to issues like inequality, hunger, and health care. In order to achieve such an agenda she may have to dislodge the dominant discourse she adopts. If she does so she would be more able to see other-than-liberal feminisms, and less able to homogenize women from non-western countries.[20]

Liberal humanism is not able to envision more-than-western visions of humanity that are rich in interconnectedness and diversity. Abstracted individualism allows for a homogeneity that makes multiplicity look chaotic and troublesome. The global west does not allow for the unity in diversity; rather global capital uses a corporatist multiculturalism to domesticate difference into a commodifiable homogeneity.

Susan Moller Okin also assumes a privileged status for liberalism. She believes that cultures must become liberal to be respected. Okin wants to prioritize women's rights and fears that multiculturalism is bad for women. She positions multiculturalism—as group rights—against women's rights—as individual rights.[21] She sees gender equality as in tension with the “claims of minority cultures” because she assumes that cultural diversity will clash with feminist goals. She says that group rights should not trump the individual rights of its members, and she sees group rights as often anti-feminist. She works from within the tradition of liberalism which posits the tension between the individual and the group at its core. Individualism is bourgeois and autonomous for her. There is always a tension between the individual and the group, whether women's rights are part of the equation or not.

Okin makes a mistake here by assuming that feminism is not also about group rights—of women as women—however individually these rights are practiced. She also does not deal with the intersectionality and multiplicity of women of color's lives when she assumes that their culture will always oppose their fair treatment. Clearly, to position multiculturalism against women, the women become homogenized in non-cultural/racial identity. She also does not wonder about new ways of thinking of women's rights in multicultural fashion..

Okin needs to re-read the dilemma and see how a different rendering of cultural rights can be used to embrace feminism. Islam has no one reading of the Qur'an for women. Okin sees servitude where she needs to learn more. To assume a hostility between Islam and feminism is to read western feminism against the Qur'an.[22] Wearing a head scarf or veiling oneself is not apriori antifeminist, unless Okin is only allowing her liberal feminist notion of sameness of treatment to be her defining criteria of feminism. Okin needs to indict patriarchal practices rather than multiculturalism as the problem. And she needs to rethink how she embraces the cultural traditions of liberalism as privileged while remaining hostile to the multiplicity of other feminisms within other-than-liberal meanings.

Universalism covers over the normalized forms of patriarchal colonialism often in the name of

democracy. Multiculturalism calls attention to diverse cultural practices, some of which are patriarchal and some of which are not. It is up to feminism to struggle with its many formulations to decipher the widest interpretive meaning of women's liberation. Multiculturalism comes clothed in many forms and should not be collapsed into a singularized westernized reading of it. In this sense a liberal feminist critique is too narrow. There are other feminisms which are a complex mix of their own cultural articulations, alongside the globalized language of women's rights. And this globalized form is both liberatory and colonizing; maybe more so now than ever given the insidious global webs of power that exploit women and girls everywhere while supposedly championing their newly won freedoms—from the soviet empire, the Taliban, and so on.

Amidst this flux some Africana womanists do not see equality as meaning sameness (of treatment with men) but rather meaning respect for who we each are. Sameness of treatment is never quite right because we are only similar to each other, never the same. And liberation is an individual, and communal, and national affair.

Africana Womanisms and their Black Feminist Meanings

Global capitalism and its cyber airwaves make more of the world visible to more people than ever, even while large portions of the globe exist without phone lines and cyber access. Africa has fallen off the global map given its lack of wiring and the present anti-terrorist preoccupation with the Middle East and South-East Asia. Blacks inside the u.s. and Africa have been made more invisible than ever as the new alien color is the brown muslim. While so much of the global discourse focuses on women in afghanistan as well as women in Islam, women in Africa continue to struggle to create sustainable lives, fight and live with AIDS, and are also challenged by misogynist fundamentalists in algeria, nigeria, and morocco.

Women's activism is a crucial part of life in most African countries. Women were central to the liberation of algeria in its war for independence, were essential to the struggles against apartheid in south africa, have led most of the environmental movements throughout the continent for sustainable development. These African roots/routes of feminism wind back to the days of the slave-trade when slave women suffered an enforced equality with black men—in bearing the whip and its cruelty. They also knew their own experience of rape and its degradation.[23]

These struggles have yet to be named as part of or central to feminist history, by black and white women alike, especially by feminists in the west. White women in england and the u.s. first named their struggles as feminist even while other-than-liberal feminisms had already existed elsewhere in many indigenous forms. Is it simply the powerful positioning of English as the dominant language of the west, rather than the actual diverse practices of women's struggle, that makes feminism western?

Clenora Hudson-Weems argues that it is the “ultimate in racist arrogance and domination to

suggest that authentic activity of women resides with white women.” Africana women in the u.s. like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells were feminists even if they did not singularly and exclusively focus on women’s issues. For Weems the struggles of African women are an originary site for understanding women’s movements. And through the slave trade and American slavery and the civil rights movement white feminists have learned from Africana women activists. Therefore, “when Africana women come along and embrace feminism, appending it to their identity as Black feminists or African feminists, they are in reality duplicating the duplicate.”[24]

There is history to be found and remembered here. And it is hugely significant that what might be called a deformed equality, or an “androgynous world was born, weirdly enough, not of freedom, but of bondage”.[25] Black women have practiced an alternative womanhood, in slavery and in freedom which nurtures alternative feminisms as well.[26] When black women ask if they are not women—“Ar’n’t I A Woman?”—the directional needs redesigning, away from white women as the standard.

Women’s embeddedness in other relations—their color/race, their economic class, their cultural identity—demands a feminism which recognizes these complexities at the start. Most feminists/womanists in Africa demand this polydimensional understanding and reject the singularity of a feminism focused on gender alone, which privileges white women and diminishes the presence of women of color. Alice Walker, though living in the u.s., coined the term womanist to refer to feminists of color who are committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”[27] She spoke black women’s need for naming women’s struggles from inside the west for themselves. Dialogues and flows across continents was a part of this naming. When Walker first coined her phrase, I was not ready to give up the term feminism and the political history and continuity it spoke.[28] Today I see that history as too narrowed and narrowing of women’s struggles elsewhere to save as such.

Awa Thiam wonders: “‘Women are the Blacks of the human race’. Can they tell us then what or who are Black Women? The Blacks of the Blacks of the human race?”[29] She calls for this specificity, while speaking the commitment of working toward African liberation in the tradition of self-reliance and autonomy. Yet, race and class are key issues for people/women of color and must come first, before gender for some Africana womanists like Clenora Hudson Weems. Liberation is a collective struggle for the entire family. Africana women, in this instance, are not fighting against the strictures of family; they have not suffered from the protective pedestal of familial womanhood.[30] They want no part of white women’s feminism in this arena.

Hudson-Weems argues that Africana womanists must name themselves. That the imperialist aspects of western feminism requires their own “self-naming, self-defining and self-identifying”. She argues that feminism has been defined by white women, for white women; and that Africana womanism is unique from white and even black (westernized) feminism.

The unique needs of African women focus on the poverty of black women in Africa and their fight for survival against colonial and neo-colonialism. This shifts the dynamic of power between men and women as well. African women connect with men in this “struggle toward a common destiny”. African men do not share the privileges of white men so he is not woman’s enemy. Because African men have not had the “same institutionalized power to oppress as White men” Weems embraces a “family pride”.^[31]

Although Weems introduces the important issue of class oppression and the way it differentiates racial realities she also reduces white feminism and feminists to women of wealth. Class, rather than racialized meanings of class becomes her oppositional framework. Black feminists in the u.s. come in many stripes. Some speak from the western liberal tradition which acts as though class and poverty are not realities to decipher, and some speak as socialists and anti-colonialists. The mix in the west is complex, as it is in Africa. Instead of parodying either side, if there are sides as such, let us earnestly blend the collective strategies and intersectional identities of women in Africa with a carefully honed critique of gender privilege. This complexifies gender to its racial and class hierarchies, always, but it does not deny the place of gender in the power-filled lives we live. As such, there are no abstracted enemies, but specified relations of power to be dismantled and rebuilt. Women’s oppression is universal but the meanings of this are always yet to be fully discovered in their polyversal forms. Women’s liberation is as complex as the oppressions defining the resistances.

Weems’ fashioning of African womanism invites a recognition of the important relatedness of people’s being. She continually writes about “liberating an entire people”; of the importance of an holistic harmony and communalism rather than a simplistic and isolated notion of individuality. African womanism is a collective struggle which also recognizes the relatedness of women to their families and communities. It “is a family-centered rather than a female-centered perspective.” Weems says it is by “necessity” that the first concern must be with “ridding society of racism, a problem which invariably affects our entire family, or total existence”. I have trouble with Weems’ idea of first and second, as do many women of color feminists, however, racism shifts and necessitates a notion of collectivity. Yet Weems seems to insist on the clash between “women and individualism over [against] human dignity and rights”.^[32] Given the colonizing history of feminist individualism of the west this is understandable. But too much is lost here.^[33]

The embrace of collectivity alongside and with a recognition of women’s individuality is a rich mix here which cannot put the two commitments in opposition or in collapse. But the tensions need exploration in new directions: between the Nigerian woman who wishes to decide about her own body without being seen as anti-family, but also who remains critical of global capital’s restructuring policies of her country. For the white liberal feminist the initial recognition of the self was in opposition to the gendered homogenization of the collectivity called woman. But in this instance the recognition of multiply oppressive collectivities necessitates a more complex

wholeness of the individual. This notion is neither west, or non-west. It is polyhuman.

Africana womanism according to 'Zulu Sofola expresses an holistic harmony and communalism rather than individual isolation. The African experience of exploitation demands a recognition of the relatedness of humans in order to build resistance and their communities.[34] South African Julia Wells stresses the importance of maternal politics in political struggle in her country. Women, fighting as mothers, against apartheid is a dramatically important part of "black South African women's resistance history." South African "motherist movements" were significant challenges to the extreme effects of apartheid rule "which invaded too deeply into their private worlds".[35] This is a moment where women's activism derives from a site of both oppression and liberation, even if not feminist as it often is depicted.

For Ifeyinwa Iweriebor African feminism is "integrationist rather than separatist". Its tactics use negotiation, confrontation, consensus, and compromise. It is often reformist.[36] Obioma Nnaemeka reiterates this sense positioned against a western feminism which is exclusionary. She looks to an inclusionary feminism which she terms "negofeminism—the feminism of neogtiation, accommodation and compromise; no ego feminism".[37]

Glo Chukukere writes that "Nigerian feminism is womanism" meaning a nonviolent and non-confrontational self-determined "ability of women to produce maximum results through cooperative endeavors". And, if feminism means a "female-oriented consciousness then there is no doubt" that Nigeria has a feminist history. However, nigerian women's history did not start with colonialism; and before 'the' western experience some argue that Nigerian women were "competent warriors, rulers, and co-administrators with their menfolk." [38] As well, not all differences between males and females are hierarchical in parallel ways with the west. Hierarchy can be diffused and multiple. There was and is potential for non-hierarchical male/female relations because there is more often overlap between domestic and public arenas. Pre-colonial Africa was often defined by complementarity, rather than subordination. West Africa still has much fluidity between public and private domains.[39]

Many Africana feminists make clear that much of the dependence/oppression of African women today was initiated and/or exacerbated by western colonialist policies. Women in many countries lost land rights with european colonization; missionaries educated boys, and not girls. They scoff that this was one of the many "benefits" of contact with western civilization.

Taiwo Ajai poignantly then notes the irony that when African women speak on behalf of their own equality they are dismissed as being 'western'. Many women in Africa see themselves as feminist/womanist even though they believe in partnership, rather than conflict between the sexes. It is this partnership that focuses on elementary literacy, freedom from hunger and poverty and disease for each and every person.[40] Each and every makes feminism truly universal here. There are complex flows to and from Africa that makes feminism polyversal in meaning; with femaleness as inclusive of humanity.

This complexity of cultural tensions and historical occlusion could not be more painfully visited than at the first international 1992 conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) where conflict erupted over who should be allowed to participate in the conference. The conference organizers were all African, primarily black women, with a few white men and white women. The african-american contingent of women attending demanded that white women not be allowed to participate in the proceedings. The nigerians, as hosts, rejected this position as an act of “feminist exclusion and imperial arrogance”. They preferred that the conference embrace a full understanding of inclusion, accomodation and negotiation instead of only seeing “color, differences, and separation”.^[41] The south-africans attending argued that everyone, regardless of race should be allowed to participate fully in the conference. They were extremely upset that two of the participants, a black and white south african who had co-authored a presentation had been reduced to tears and sadness.^[42]

Many of the Africana women criticized the u.s. black women who thought they spoke in African voices, as western and imperialist in their actions. Their divisiveness seemed like European competitiveness, not African cooperativeness.^[43] Many of the African attendees saw these u.s. women as shunting the malignancy of their own angst onto the conference. They disrupted the conference because they had come to “‘find themselves’ and return to the motherland; we were caught up in their frustration and rage at being unable to do either”. De Bryant poignantly states her grief about the agony felt by the white women attending and celebrates the fact that she cannot enjoy their pain. If I did, it “would mean I have a hole in my soul through which all that is humane and just and good is leaking out”.^[44] “Fidelia Fouche argues that apartheid can ever cure apartheid.^[45] It is interesting to see this fault line across skin color, defined by culture, between Africana women and u.s. black women.

At one at the same time we see black women in serious conflict with each other over the meaning of feminism/womanism and the meanings of inclusivity. It is particularly interesting to see this played out in Africa with african-american women being criticized for their western exclusivity. This fault-line is not as clear-cut as it might first appear—there are westerners, so-to-speak in Africa, and Africans—in a cultural sense-- in the west. And, white western women were influenced by black women both inside and outside the west. The flows have always been here even though the power-filled relations are always shifting.

The other-than-liberal Africana feminisms, and black u.s. feminisms are more inclusive, in part, because they view women as human beings interconnected with others, and with systems of power. As such the African woman can be said to be one sort of original feminist, with her inclusive and humanistic character.^[46] The white woman of the/a western tradition is simply another. In this particular conversation, the western in western feminism means white, and liberal individualist, and singularly focused on gender. It is by default not focused on issues of poverty and racism. In an other-than-liberal polyversal anti-racist feminism there must be dialogue between and across and through: women of color feminisms, Africana womanism,

feminisms of and in the west, feminisms of the global south, feminisms in Islam. These dialogues must shake loose the language of modernity, universalism, nationalism, globalization, tradition, religiosity, and secularism so they have the inclusive meanings for women that they need. But I would hope that this dialogue still names gender as such, but in non-exclusionary form and sexual freedom as key to the mix of race and class and so on. I want a feminism/womanism that includes lesbians and gays in Africa and Islam.[47]

Feminisms in Islam(s)

The context for thinking about the universality of humanity is hard while the war against terrorism rages. A “sense of genuine universal humanity” is always the chief casualty of war.[48] When Islam is named as an enemy at the same time that the rights of women are used to define the war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, Islam and democracy get positioned as oppositions. But I want to entertain the democratic essence of Islamic tradition as it is articulated by feminists in Islam and dialogue it with and alongside Africana and western feminisms.

The Qur’an which is the text for Islamic practice has multiple interpretations and interpreters. Much of the interpretation is done within and through a misogynist rendering of patriarchal privileges. Women are then read as less than, different from, in need of protection, to be veiled and hidden away. This patriarchal reading matches similar readings in fundamentalist Judaism and Christianity. There is no clear divide between west and non-west when it comes to misogynist fundamentalism and patriarchal privilege. All religions can be read for the sinfulness of women, the contamination of their blood, their lust, and the need for their seclusion. The Taliban took this fear and rage towards women to a horrific extreme but this should not occlude the recognition of the universalizing practices of masculinist privilege.

A problem with calling the Taliban fundamentalist is that it makes it seem as though they actually know the authentic fundamentals of Islam. Instead there are many feminists in Islam as well as believing women who argue that the Qur’an is potentially as democratic for women as it is not.[49] The text itself has democratic capabilities. The Qur’an is filled with open meanings for what equivalence can and should mean for women and men. According to Azizah Y. Al-Hibri nowhere does the Qur’an say that Eve was crafted out of Adam. Instead it states that males and females are created by God from the same soul or spirit (*nafs*). The founding myths as such are not inherently patriarchal when read in this way.[50]

Leila Ahmed chooses to think of at least two Islams: one of men, another of women. Men’s Islam—an official textual Islam—is interpreted with several authenticities which are misogynist. Women’s Islam evolves in practice through oral traditions which are always changing and developing as women sort through the meanings of Islam in daily life.[51]

The struggles between sectors of mainstream Islam, Islamic misogynist fundamentalists, and the

western culture of global capital with its discourse of freedom, have become more visible. Established practices of patriarchal culture are unsettled as the universalizing practices of global capital redefine the secure divisions between public and private life, family and economy, men and women. Women's lives are at the center of this flux and change and they become the targets for establishing cultural autonomy and nationalist identity. Yet many of these women, some who call themselves feminist, are not obedient and docile. They have been sorting out their own democratic conception of Islam for decades. Their effect has not gone unnoticed by fundamentalist misogynists of all sorts. Women in countries throughout the muslim world have been unsettling the masculinist divide while global capital appropriates as well as instigates women's freedom.

The suicide rate of women in South East Turkey is two times as high as the rest of the country; where women are two times as likely to kill themselves as men. [52] In Tehran, Iran, although the law now requires women to cover their hair and conceal their bodies in loose clothing women still have their individual acts of rebellion. Those wealthy enough have nose jobs and wear their post-surgical bandages as badges of honor. Others work-out aerobically in their women only gyms and wear long nail implants. Others wear their long coats and scarfs over their black mini skirts imported from Italy. A few teenage girls cut their hair short and dress as boys to rebel against the restrictive dress codes.[53] And so far, it is the women's vote which keeps the more moderate government of Mohammed Khatami in power. In Morocco hundreds of thousands support the government plan to reform women's status in terms of literacy and divorce law.

A few countries are attempting to articulate an Islamic politics which recognizes the multiple and plural meanings of Islamic practice. In Tunisia, according to Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, the Islamic leader Ghannushi, who has been banned from Tunis, has discussed the need to politically institutionalize the multiple interpretations of the founding texts. Recognizing the distinction, between the Qur'an and its interpreters and interpretations, Ghannushi has suggested that the electorate be allowed to vote for or against policies that flow from any given reading. This utilizes the doctrine of *nasiha*—the obligation, more than the right—to criticize and debate. As such, this formulation of Islamic tradition accommodates a plurality of scriptural interpretations; difference is understood as a blessing according to the *shari'a*. Asad reiterates that *ijtihad* authorizes the “construction of coherent differences”, not the “imposition of homogeneity”. In this instance pluralism is not foreign to Islam; tolerance is not the same as indifference; and intolerance should not be equated with violence. As such, the richness of Islam lies in its openness rather than oneness with God.[54]

This is not the Islam that the west sees. The Islam of the west remains static, and traditional; non-modern. But Talal Asad asks us to see that tradition need not be fixed and unchanging. Authenticity need not be repetitive and uncreative. He gives as an example the tradition of liberalism; which continues to change and adapt. Traditional practices allow for the possibility of argument and reformulation; as such traditions can be central to modernity itself.[55]

He wonders why “western culture is thought to be pregnant with positive futures in a way no other cultural condition is”. And why liberalism has acquired such a hegemonic status that all other cultures are judged and seen in terms of a teleological westernized path to the future.[56]

Saba Mahmood also interrogates the way the global west thinks oppositions religiosity and secularism; traditionalism with patriarchy and modernity with women’s freedom. She asks that religious practices in Islam not be viewed as apriori subordinating of women. Instead women’s agency within these practices must first be explored. Mahmood studies women in the Mosque movement in Egypt as “reconfiguring” gendered practices within Islamic pedagogy. These women defy the practice of male teaching and instruct women and girls on the meaning of the Qur’an. They have their own rendering of self-realization and autonomous will which cannot simply be read from the west for the west. The women’s Mosque movement wants to restore virtue and humility; and embraces “individual and collective practices of pious living”. These women “subvert the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices”.[57]

Women’s agency for Mahmood is “not simply resistance to domination” but is also an “action that is created and enabled by relations of subordination”. If I understand this point correctly it means that the simple oppositioning of oppression and freedom is ill-placed and that agency develops from within resistances that are incomplete or less than total. Mahmood re-reads the meaning of docility and humility as the effort to achieve a malleability to be instructed in the ways of Islam, but with women as teachers of this process. She sees agency instead of passivity. Al-haya, meaning to be diffident and modest is seen as a process of learning shyness, not oppression.[58] Mahmood embodies the veil with piety and rebellion.

Mahmood asks secular women to presume the oppressiveness of religiosity. Cultural and religious practices can be habitually repressive AND re-readings are still possible. She does not see secular reasoning and morality as exhaustive of “valuable human flourishings”. She asks that non-liberal traditions be explored for their possibilities for liberation and not be subsumed into a “universalized seeing of subordination”.[59] When women teach and study Islamic scriptures this modernizes religiosity and does not limit it to a traditionalist misogyny. Islam is not simply custom and tradition; nor is the west simply modern.

For Mahmood choosing religion can be an act of liberation as can veiling, if the woman sees it as part of the process of teaching herself humility. The veil means “both being and becoming a certain kind of person”[60] and contributes to the making of the self. And they develop their individual selves even if not in a western autonomized fashion.

Yet, the history of veiling is often also one of misogynist fundamentalism and western colonialism; meaning different things at different times. Women have been forced to remove the veil as a sign of modernization AND to don it as a statement of anti-colonialism and anti-westernization. Context matters before women’s agency can be known.[61] Self-realization is not simply a western construct although its equation with autonomous free will is. More than

liberal notions of self-fulfillment exist in these instances.

Still, I wonder why veil women and not men? Why this particular process for women's humility? Why not have men veil to learn this humility as well? Or am I reducing equality to sameness of treatment, in western fashion? This said, given my cultural context I would not wear the veil, but I do not see it as more problematic than other western codes of femininity. I dress as a female with signs given on my face: make-up, hair in view; and skirts, and jewelry. But I also think I give these signs my own personal meanings, which obviously I am not fully free to do.

So what are the boundaries, if any, between liberal individualism and Islamic self-fulfillment, and Africana womanist collectivity? The concept of self cuts through each but with different understandings of fulfillment for the self. In order to begin to see the polyvalent status of individuality within these discourses one needs to de-naturalize the concept of the singular, competitive, autonomous self while holding onto the notion of the social, communal self which has obligations to others but rights as well. This is neither an anti or pro western/liberal stance. Rather it is a dialogic positioning of Africana womanist collectivism with an individuality defined in other-than-liberal individualist frames. The self-determining self is free AND not; liberal AND not; free and yet connected. Equality is not simply western, meaning sameness of treatment but understood as a diversely unified treatment of fairness.

Little of this complexity comes through in the anti-terrorist war rhetoric of post-Sept. 11th between modernity and the west; and religious fundamentalism and the east.[62] Women's rights becomes the rallying cry as women are once again made the pawns of war. The civilized world will protect the women of Afghanistan from the Taliban even though there are religious fanatics in the west; and secularists and mainstream believers in the east. This use of women's condition is hardly new to the women of Afghanistan. The Soviets de-veiled women and insisted they wear skirts as part of their modernization program. Then the Taliban passed laws enforcing the burqa and disallowing women to work or go to school, effecting up to 150,000 working women and about 100,000 girls at school as part of their anti-soviet policy.[63]

The Feminist Majority, a western liberal feminist activist group was crucial in first bringing the plight of Afghan women to the attention to the world. The work they did was utterly crucial and yet problematic in that their exposure of women's condition did not criticize u.s. policies for past support of Taliban rule. This explains in part the Bush administration's early waffling on women's rights. At first Bush officials said that they did not want to appear too pushy about women's rights and needed to be culturally sensitive in their condemnation. Shortly after, the State Department released a report the "Taliban's War Against Women", which states that "Islam is a religion that respects women and humanity", while the "Taliban respects neither". The report then advocated a role for women in a post-Taliban Afghan government.[64]

Little was ever said about women activists in Afghanistan or in exile; nor was their recognition of

the wide swath of feminisms that exist within Islam. Instead the feminist rhetoric used by the Bush administration dominated the airwaves. This has very much to do with the way that the u.s. dominates globalized media in the first place. But it also has to do with the fact that much of the feminism in islam is also anti-colonial, and anti-western. Most muslim feminists who speak against the Taliban also speak against u.s. foreign policy. Fawzia Afzal-Khan states quite clearly that muslim feminist voices speak simultaneously against “Islamic extremism” and the “unjust foreign policies of the United States that have contributed and continue to contribute to the ‘hijacking’ of Islam for terrorist ends”. Most muslim feminists argue that the u.s. must rethink its foreign policy as a whole, particularly in the middle east.[65] The feminism that is publicized in and by the west silences these voices.

Fifty-seven men and five women—all of whom had been exiled activists-- attended the peace talks in Bonn. [66] The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) who were at first excluded from the proceedings, were quite critical that the women chosen as negotiators were compromised by their husbands and/or fathers allegiances to the Northern Alliance, which is also misogynist fundamentalist.[67] This simply shows the factionalism that is endemic to political struggle within the afghan women’s movement.

An Afghan Women’s Summit for Democracy was held in Brussels and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton hosted a Forum on the Future of Women in Afghanistan along with the Feminist Majority on the importance of women in the reconstruction of their country.[68] At the hearings many of the afghan women spoke about the importance of support from u.s. women’s groups and yet their fear of a cultural imperialism that does not fully understand afghan women’s particular situations.

It is also instructive to note that Hillary Clinton, especially as first lady, was very active in speaking on behalf of women’s rights for women in other countries, while not here at home. Although she traveled the world to speak on behalf of women in india and Africa, she remains mute on issues like abortion, welfare rights, and day care needs, for u.s. women. She appears to equate women’s rights with modernization by the west.

When Dr. Sima Samar, the physician and exile who now heads the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in the new afghan government was asked whether a liberated afghanistan is a western one she answered: Why should everything be Westernized? Liberation is not just a Western idea. Everyone wants it.” The liberated afghan woman will have access to education, the right to vote, the right to work, the right to choose a spouse. But these are rights of all human beings, not just western ones.[69] Yohra Yusuf Daoud, a former Ms. Afghan who is a radio talk show host in Malibu, California speaks of her mixed views of women’s liberation. “If a woman has to wear a burqa head to toe but can go to school, then that is something I approve of”. [70]

Yet one more view expresses one more variety on this theme. The american journalist Amy Waldman says that she could not get used to speaking to women through the burqa.. You don’t

see a person; “it feels like talking to a voice box”. It distorts the woman; it is “an impenetrable wall of pale blue polyester where a human being should be”.^[71] She could not make sense of the contradictions as the Taliban would trade sleazy pictures of Indian women, cover and seclude their own, while treating her with respect.

These contradictions are part of the context of women’s rights discourse. The U.S. supports regimes that greatly limit women’s rights when other more pressing policies are at stake. President Bush calls for women’s rights in Afghanistan while he plans to shrink or eliminate several federal offices charged with protecting women’s interests here at home. Ten regional offices of the Labor Department of the Women’s Bureau are to be closed; offices on women’s health in the Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are to be consolidated. As well, Bush did not continue the White House Women’s Initiative and Outreach post created by Clinton in 1995. As a result many programs assisting working women are now in jeopardy.^[72] One senator, claiming anonymity says of Bush’s Afghan woman’s policy: “I think this is a great chance for them to do a gender gap number without rubbing up against the right wing”.^[73]

This hypocrisy makes the work of women, everywhere, all the harder. Afghan women walk the tightrope between being too traditional and too modern while neither choice is one of their making. They have to try and find a balance that works for them. As Rina Amiri, a senior associate in the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard, who was born in Afghanistan says: “If we push the gender agenda too blatantly, and we push it too forcefully, not only will Afghans define their attitudes toward gender in defiance of the Taliban but also in defiance of the West”.^[74] Yet, one should not see simple domination here because Afghan women defied the Taliban while wearing the burqa. Many women taught their daughters to read, others organized secret schools at great risk to themselves, others.^[75] They will negotiate a new life from their incredible resilience, which is neither patriarchal nor western.

Renaming Feminism as Polyversal

Anti-racist feminisms are humanist theories of inclusivity that name women in their complete varieties. This variety expresses the standard of polyversality—a connectedness rooted in distinctness; a sharedness expressed through uniqueness. This feminism denies self-determination to no one. It demands choice over one’s body and one’s mind. It seeks to multiply the meanings of each activity.

Feminism has a unity which is also simultaneously diverse. It is multiple and continues to multiply. As such, feminism is the most inclusive theory of social justice I know but I am not sure that this is the same thing as saying, as feminist bell hooks does, that Feminism is for Everyone. Because feminisms are about displacing and rearranging masculinist privilege—with its racist and colonialist roots/routes—there are men and women alike who will not embrace it. The inclusivity is too revolutionary; the power rearrangements too unsettling.

This polydimensional start to feminisms means that liberal, Islamic, and Africana feminists dialogue with each other while challenging the limits of each others viewings. This means that all feminisms must unsettle the west/non-west divide in order to see each other more fully. Feminists in the west have the most work to do because their ways of seeing have been stunted gravely by the positionings of power.

We, the big `we`, must agree that most women want freedom and most women want equality as well. This is what makes us similarly human. That we may define these constructs differently also makes us uniquely human. Women's polyversality allows us to see one another but not simply as in a mirror. At this moment women across the globe must find a way to mix and match the different traditions of women's struggle. The process of naming, and seeing, and working together must dislodge traditions, and find new ways of changing our lives which leaves none of us behind.

Endnotes

[1]I do not capitalize countries and identities to call attention to their fluidity rather than their static and ahistorical meanings.

[2]I am indebted to Carol Quillen, "Feminist Theory, Justice and the Lure of the Human", *Signs*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 87-122, for the phrasing, "other-than" in pluralizing feminisms beyond liberalism..

[3]Zillah Eisenstein, *The Color of Gender, Reimaging Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 175. Also see my *The Female Body and the Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially chapters 2, 3, and 6.

[4]Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1987), p. 190.

[5]Jill Nelson, "Call Me Woman", *Ms. Magazine*, vol. XI, no. 2 (Feb./March, 2001), p. 48.

[6]Inji Aflatun, "We Egyptian Women", in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 350.

[7]Zillah Eisenstein, *Hatreds, Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 109.

[8]I am indebted to my friend and African historian Sandra Greene for helping me clarify this point.

[9]As quoted in Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women, Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 199.

[10]Ibid., As stated by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1996, p. 23.

[11]Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001), chapter 7.

[12]Eisenstein, *Hatreds*, chapter 5.

[13]Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981);

reprinted (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), p. 4.

[14]Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 74, 8, 32. 242.

[15]Carol Quillen, "Feminist Theory, Justice and the Lure of the Human", pp. 88, 89, 100, 120.

[16]Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 9, 256.

[17]Ibid., p.9.

[18]Amartya Sen, "Population and Gender Equity", *The Nation*, vol. 274, no. 4 (July 24/31, 2000), p. 18.

[19]"Women Key to Effective Development", available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/gender/>

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