

## **TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM PERSPECTIVES ON ARAB MUSLIM WOMEN IN WESTERN LENSES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

International feminism entitled for its struggle against gendered injustice within a liberal human rights discourse. This paper is a call for women feminists, especially in the Arab Muslim World, to share common interests and believes on the struggle to end oppression and discrimination based on sex and gender. This paper explores Arab Muslim within the theoretical context of the transnational feminism. The paper also maintains that Arab Muslim feminism see transnational feminism as an alternative to gain prominence in the area of feminism and globalization. Arab Muslim feminism challenges the universal claim of Western feminism to speak on behalf and for all women especially women of long inherited culture and religion like them. Bell Hooks presumes "Western feminists have done little to work on the idea of the diversity of women's lived experiences" (Hooks, 1989) and this paper presents some of the debate over feminism in lenses of both Arab Muslim Feminism and Western Feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Arab Muslim Women, Arab Muslim Feminism, Gender, Western Feminism

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 1995 Beijing Women's Conference titled *The Challenges of Local Feminism:*

*Women's Movements in Global Perspective* marked the coming age of transnational feminism and the hide of locally based women's movements local feminism connote the supposed particular provincialism and primordialism of the Third World Women while global connote the breadth and universality that is often associated with Western Feminism (Basu, 2003).

Feminism's engagement with globalization coincided with the second feminism in the 1980s and was popularly known as international feminism. International feminism grew out and continued

to be sustained by feminist networking that takes place around the world. International feminism was critiqued by feminists from the South of America since 1990s. They were critiqued for being too preoccupied with commonalities and solidarities without taking seriously the specific differences that women in the South encountered, particularly the oppression that women faced on the basis of race and as a result of colonization (Spivak, 1996).

This theory shares its roots with Post-colonialism theory. Many perspectives that vary from socialists to liberal are represented under the rubric of transnational feminism. However, the tendencies that are of interest are those that speak to the formation of autonomous, affinity groups, as opposed to those which aim to promote women in leadership roles by working with static and capitalist institutions. Example of those is the transnational feminist group Women's Environmental and Development Organization (WEDO, 2011).

International feminism was also critiqued for articulating its struggle against gendered injustice within a liberal human right discourse that overlooked the practices of the State. More recently, an alternative mode of political activism and scholarship has been gaining prominence in the area of feminism and globalization. Feminists working in this alternative identify themselves as transnational feminists. Those grew up out of an engagement with solid, economic, and political struggles that related to dominance and exploitation in terms of colonial and national contexts. It focuses on the role of gender, race, class, and sexuality and on "the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and unmaking of the notion state" (Mohanty 2003, 9). So, rather than focusing on generalizations of oppression that are assumed of all women transnational feminism examines the specific nature of oppression as it occurs through intersectionality of race, class, and other social identity locations within a particular local context. In understanding such analysis, it also examines the integral role of autonomous groups of resistance that occur in the making and unmaking of the state. A good example of this that came to my mind while working on this chapter is the work that undertook with both Israeli and Palestinian women who both had suffered the loss of some of their family members as a result of Palestinian – Israeli conflict. These women were able to come together because of their common resistance to the military practices of their states.

Mohanty described transnational feminism as a mode of intellectual and political activism that focus on conditions that allow for transnational solidarity on the basis of common for all exploitation that women divide, but grounded it on the specific form that this oppression takes within women's lived realities (9, 10). Transnational Feminism maintains that women's struggle must be understood in relation to historic, cultural, economic, and political contexts, which render it impossible to speak of an average third – World women. Transnational feminism seeks to understand oppression as it is in different cultures, by incorporating positions of class, race,

gender, and sexual orientation among a host of others. Transnational feminism also embraces a commitment to activism that seeks to promote dialogue through the construction of alternative structures that allow for the flourishing of multiple voices and subjectivities. Transnational Feminists have made effective use of the human rights framework for achieving local global objectives of women around the world. Some challenges caused by differences in local contexts, activists' goals and obstacles, and conceptualizations have appeared and pose political challenges and opportunities to the movement and to the human rights approach.

Amrita Basu thought it is time to replace the sentence "Think Globally, Act Locally" with "Think Locally, Act Globally" (McCann, 68). By contrast, Basu uses the term local to refer to indigenous and regional, and global to refer to the transnational. She maintains that there is still controversy about the significance of transnational movements, NGO's, networks, and advocacy groups. She also claims that some scholars speak of the emergence of a global civil society; others are more skeptical (68). On the other hand, Valentine Moghadam argues that transnational networks are organizing women around the most pressing questions of the day, reproductive rights, the growth of religious fundamentalism, and the adverse effects of structural adjustment policies. Moghadam believes that recent networks have a broader and more far-reaching impact than local movements (Moghadam, 2005). As women's movements have become more transnational, their commitment to grassroots mobilization and cultural changes has diminished. On the other hand, Sonia Alvarez argues that women's movements are becoming increasingly bureaucratized as they have come to work more closely with NGO's, political parties, state institutions, and multicultural agencies. One explanation for the difference between the positions of Valentine Moghadam and Sonia Alvarez is that they examine such different contexts. Moghadam's optimism about the role of transnational networks may be born of the pessimism she feels about the potential for women's movements in face of the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. By contrast, Alvarez expresses concern about cooptation because historically women's movements in Latin America have been strong and closely tied to left-wing parties and human rights movements. Basu explores the relationship between the transnational of the 90s and the feminism of the 60s and 70s when Robin Morgan controversy claimed: "Sisterhood is Global" (McCann, 70). Basu found herself in front of a big question and that what is the challenging of local feminisms and women's movements in Global perspectives? She found herself navigating two things:

1. Resisting the tendency narrowly to equate women's movements with autonomous urban, middle-class feminist groups
2. Defining women's movements so broadly that the term includes virtually all forms of women's activism.

Basu argues that women's movements must be situated within the particular political economics state policies and cultural politics of the regions in which they are active. She emphasizes the indefinite character of transnational activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s (70). White transnational ideas, resources, and organizations have been extremely successful around certain issues in some regions; their success with these issues is more circumscribed elsewhere.

The international women's conferences that occurred in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) provide a fruitful opportunity to explore changing relationships among women's organizations transnationally. These conferences provided insights into the working of the international state system of what some describe as a burgeoning global civil society.

Transnational women's movements are themselves extremely diverse. A minority of them seek to challenge the feminization of poverty and class inequality that globalization entails. A much larger group of women's organizations has sought to extend women's civic and political rights, particularly to address violence against women and the denial of women's rights by religious nationalists. Women's groups have supported transnational campaigns against sexual violence in countries where the state is repressive or indifferent and women's movements are weak. Conversely, transnational feminism has provoked more distrust in places where women's movements have emerged, grown, and defined themselves dependently of Western feminism. In brief, transnational feminism breeds solidarity issues like violence against women, working with men in zones of conflict, and postcolonial literature has transnational appeal.

### **WESTERN FEMINISTS' THOUGHT**

Mohja Kahf, an Arab American scholar, studied the Western representation of Muslim women in Medieval's, Renaissance's, and Enlightenment's texts. Her study concluded that the image of the Muslim woman in Western culture has been a changing, evolving phenomenon. The Muslim woman occupies a less central place in the narratives of the medieval texts than she does in texts of the nineteenth century (Kahf, 4).

The Muslim woman in the medieval literature typically appears as a queen or a noblewoman exercising a power of harm over the hero. These figures usually represented feminine and reflect the failure of their parent religious to repeat proper gender roles. The main plot of Western stories about Muslim women was usually about a noble Muslim woman who attracted to a Christian man imprisoned in her father or husband. Then she aids him and converts to Christianity and transfers her father's or husband's wealth to the Christians. In Medieval texts, there was no mentioning for the veil or the seclusion of Muslim women (5, 6).

In Renaissance's texts, the depiction of Muslim women in some European literature shows the features of the "Wanton" queen of old. In many Renaissance texts, a Muslim woman continued to be portrayed with the same constraints that Western counterpart has functioning in a field of similarity or indifference rather than the "Otherness" (5). The veil and the harem did not exist in the medieval representation of the Muslim women and are barely present in the Renaissance age. However, in the seventeenth century, the two concepts of the veil and the seraglio or harem enter into a Western representation of Muslim women. The word "seraglio" was seen in English texts in 1581 while the word harem appeared in English texts in 1631 (6).

In the nineteenth century, the Western's discourse of harem and veil rise up due to the colonization era in particular. Kahf claims that Western colonization of Muslim countries was the only responsible factor for the emergence of narratives that portray Muslim women as victims. The domination of the Muslims' land composes the image of the Muslim woman in the imagination of the West. The Western discourse regarding Islam as the main source of women's oppression reached its summit towards the end of the nineteenth century and Western discourse started to tackle Muslim women as helpless and slaved in the harem (7).

Western feminists' representation of Arab Muslim women has been a debated issue in both the West and the East. Western feminists' representation of Third World women, which Arab Muslim women are part from, stemmed from their own thought as Western feminists who have their own approaches and particular theoretical frameworks in exploring and studying women's status and subordination worldwide. So, it is important in this work to give an overview of the focuses of some important Western feminism though to understand why and how they portray Third World women the way they do.

Therefore, it is significant to clarify that feminism is identified by its women's orientation and attitudes towards different issues. Some of these issues are women, men; gender-related key terms, women's oppression, patriarchy, women's economic and social lives, physical and mental wellbeing of women. In this section, I am going to tackle some of the most important Western feminists' approaches that constitute Western feminists' thought and at the same time are well articulated by Third World feminists. I also chose these feminist's approaches because they show the issues that Western feminism and Third World feminism argue about like the views on women – men relationship, women's reproduction rights, the patriarchal society as a source of oppression and other debating terms. Some of the Western feminists' approaches I am handling in this section are:

### **LIBERAL FEMINISM**

Liberal feminism complaint that women were confined to a main “job” of wife – mother and that what was the theme of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*. Women who wanted jobs or who have ambitions to move in politics were suspect unless they were also “good” wives and mothers. There is another problem which left women down and that is men’s devaluation of them as not too bright, clothes – conscious and overly emotional.

Liberal Feminism claim that gender differences are not based on biology and therefore women and men are not all that different. Their common humanity supersedes their procreative differences. If women and men are not so different then they should be treated differently under the law. For them, women should have the same legal rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities. Liberal feminism accepts and works with the gender system aiming to remove it of its discriminatory effects on women. Marry Wollstonecraft argues in favor of educational partly in practical terms. She claims that unlike emotional and dependent women who routinely avoid their domestic duties and indulge their desires, rational and independent women will tend to be "observant daughter", "affectionate sisters," "faithful wives", and "reasonable mothers. (Wollstonecraft, 61) That is very true because educated women will be a major contributor to society's welfare. Through the pages of her previous book, Wollstonecraft urged women to become autonomous decision makers, but often beyond insisting that the path to autonomy goes through the academy, she praised women with little in the way of concrete guidance. Wollstonecraft presented a vision of a woman strong in mind and body, who is not a slave to her passions, her husband, or her children. For her, the ideal woman is less interested in fulfilling herself. In order to liberate herself from oppressive rules of an emotional cripple, petty shrew, and narcissistic sex objects, a woman must obey the commands of reasons discharge her wifely and motherly duties faithfully. Wollstonecraft asserted that women who are "toy of men, his rattle," which "must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused." Rather, the woman is an "end" a rational agent whose dignity consists in having the capacity for self – determination and to treat her as a mere means is to treat her as less than a person (61).

Around 1960 a new generation of feminists proclaimed as the fact what the suffragists Stanton and Anthony always alleged that in order to be fully liberated; women need economic opportunities as well as civil liberties. In the mid of 1960 liberal feminists assembled in one of several groups for the purpose of improving women's status by applying legal, social and other pressures upon institutions ranging from the Bell Telephone Company to television networks to the major political parties.

Betty Friedan accepted both the radical feminist critique that liberal feminists are prone to co-option by a male establishment and the conservative feminist critique that liberal feminists are

out of touch with the bulk of family in high regard. Friedan concluded that contemporary women wives' and mothers' part-time absence from home would enable husband and children to become more self-sufficient people capable of doing their own work. Friedan used women's choices of motherhood and wives over careers by convincing 1980s feminists to move from what termed first stage feminism to what she labeled second stage feminism. She noted that this new form of feminism would require women to work with men in order to escape the excesses of feminist mystique which "denied the core of women's personhood that is fulfilled through love, nature, home" as well as the excesses of the feminine mystique, "defined women solely in terms of their relation to men as wives, mothers, and homemakers" (Friedan, 2001). After seven years of publishing her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan changed her message to women when she described as culturally feminine some thinking and acting which emphasizes fluidity, flexibility, and interpersonal sensitivity and she described as culturally masculine the styles of thinking and acting which stress hierarchical, authoritarian, strictly task-oriented leadership based on instrumental technological rationality (Rosemarie, 1998).

Liberal Feminism goal is to free women from oppressive gender roles that are from those roles used as justifications for giving women a lesser place, or not place at all especially in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal Feminism stresses that patriarchal society controls sex and gender, considering appropriate for women only jobs that are associated with the feminine personality. However, meaningful feminist approaches to combating gender discrimination is the classical and welfare approaches both of which rely heavily on legal remedies, but liberal feminists like Friedan offered another approach that used the idea of androgyny to counteract society's traditional tendency to value masculine traits. Discussions of sex differences, gender roles and androgyny have indeed helped focus liberal feminists' drive toward liberal, equality and justice of all.

One of the most severe critics of liberal feminism is Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political theorist, she claimed that liberal feminists are wrong to emphasize individual rights over the common good and choice over commitment since "there is no way to create real communities out of an aggregate of freely choosing adults". Elshtain also claimed that liberal feminists are wrong to put a high premium on so-called male values. She accused the Friedan of 1960s and to a lesser extent Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Taylor of equating male being with human being "manly" virtue with human virtue (Elshtain, 244). In her critique she identified what she considered liberal feminism's three major flaws:

1. It is claimed that women can become like men if they set their minds to it.
2. It is claimed that most women want to become like men.

3. It is claimed that all women should want to become like men to aspire to masculine values. Like Elshtain, Alison Jagger criticized liberal feminists for being too eager to adopt "male" values, but she targeted primarily what she perceived of the self as a rational, autonomous agent, that is as a "male" self. She also criticized political solipsism on empirical grounds noting it makes little sense to think of individuals as somehow existing prior to the formation of community through some sort of contract. However, Jagger observed that liberal political thought holds a conception of human nature that locates our uniqueness as human persons in our capacity for rationality. Some other critics claim that Liberal feminism serves only or mainly the interests of white, heterosexual, middle – class women. Maybe this assumption came from the point where Friedan addressed a largely white, middle class, and a well-educated group of women in her book *The Feminist Mystique*.

Finally, Liberal Feminism increased stress on issues of race has prompted an increasing number of minority women to join and become active members of liberal feminists' organizations. In addition to racism, the class has been an issue within liberal feminism because women who initially led the women's rights movement were found from the upper middle class. Nowadays, liberal feminism has moved away from their traditional belief that any woman who wants to can liberate herself individually and regardless of her conditions. Their new belief now is to achieve a modest goal and that is creating equal employment opportunities for women, which will require not only the effort of the individual woman but the effort of a whole society.

### **POSTMODERN FEMINISM**

Postmodern feminism began in the early 1980s. It also overlaps with the third-wave feminism which began in the early 1990s. Postmodern feminist thought challenges and avoids the essentialist definitions of femininity that was spread during the period of modern feminism. Modern feminism worked with the existentialist view on women which establishes the argument that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one" (De Beauvoir, 32) and thus they focus is on the social and cultural construction of women by the system.

Postmodern Feminists have built on the ideas of Foucault, de Beauvoir, as well as Derrida and Lacan. While there is much difference in postmodern feminism, there is some common ground. Postmodern Feminists accept the male/female binary as a main categorizing force in our society. Following Simone de Beauvoir, they see female as having being cast into the role of the Other (32). They criticize the structure of society and the dominant order, especially in its patriarchal aspects. Many postmodern feminists, however, reject the feminist label, because anything that ends with an "ism" reflects an essentialist conception. Postmodern Feminism is the ultimate

acceptor of diversity. Multiple truths, multiple roles, multiple realities are part of its focus. There is a rejection of the essential nature of women, of one-way to be a woman. Post structural feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism.

Three writers have been influential in the establishment of postmodern feminism as a philosophy: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Hélène Cixous is a writer of prose who built on Derrida's works to criticize the very nature of writing. According to Cixous, man's writing is filled with binary oppositions but woman's writing is scribbling, jotting down, interrupted by life's demands (Rosemarie, 199). She also relates feminine writing to female sexuality and women's body concepts (200, 01). Her idea is that development of this kind of writing will change the rules that currently govern language and ultimately the thinking processes and the structure of society. Luce Irigaray is a psychoanalyst whose primary focus is to liberate women from men's philosophies, including the ones of Derrida and Lacan, on which she's building. Irigaray takes on Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of child development and is one of the thousands who criticize the oedipal complex (202, 05). However, Irigaray has three strategies for woman to "experience herself as something other than 'waste' or 'excess' in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology.: 1. create a gender-neutral language, 2. "engage in lesbian and autoerotic practice, for by virtue of exploring the multifaceted terrain of the female body, women will learn to speak words and think thoughts that will blow the phallus over; mime the mimes men have imposed on women (202, 05). If women exist only in men's eyes, as images, women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions." This means wear red high heels. Julia Kristeva rejects the idea that the biological man and the biological woman are identified with the "masculine" and "feminine" (205, 06) respectively. To insist that people are different because their anatomy is to force both men and women into a repressive structure. Kristeva openly accepts the label of feminist, but refuses to say there is a "woman's perspective": Kristeva sees the problems of women as Other similar to the problems of other groups excluded from the dominant: Jews, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities. Like other postmodern feminists, she viewed the use of language as crucial. In her view, linear, logical "normal" writing was repressed, and writing that emphasized rhythm and sound and was syntactically illogical was unrepressed.

A major critique of Postmodern Feminism is its seeming identification of women with the feminine and the biological body. Many view Postmodern Feminists as valorizing women and the feminine over male and the masculine. To many feminists, the idea that they should embrace the feminine, or "mime the mimes men have imposed on women" (Hoeveler, 12) feels awfully similar to the pressure to be feminine from the dominant society. Some of us didn't want to wear feminine looking dresses when our mothers tried to make us go to the patriarchal church and we

don't want to wear them in graduate school either (Rosemarie, 2006). However, most of the criticism simplifies Postmodern Feminism. As we have seen, there are widely varying viewpoints within this theoretical framework. While this diversity is seen as empowering by some feminists, many others are concerned with the potential loss of the feminist community. With no essential philosophy accepted by all feminists, it is difficult to make a political action.

One of the most common criticisms of Postmodern Feminism is its apparently irrational writing. Much of the writing of Postmodernists rejects linear construction in their writing. And so accusations of elitism have been leveled at the Postmodern Feminism as a whole. Critics contend that only a few academics can participate because the jargon is so thick, and that "true" feminists address issues of political import. Considering that Postmodernists reject essentialism, there is an obvious lack of conceptual understanding of Postmodern Feminism reflected in these criticisms. Also, because linear, normal speech and writing are viewed as part of the propaganda of the dominant order, breaking them down the linguistic power structure is, in their philosophies, an important part of undermining that power. So in fact, being obtuse and chaotic is their way of introducing change and therefore offering new meanings.

Postmodern Feminism has resulted in some of the most groundbreaking research in the last twenty years. Its major technique, discourse analysis has been used in many different fields to ask many different questions. A logical progression of postmodern theory has refreshed feminism by questioning many assumptions that were previously unexamined. While as of yet it has not been a major presence in the field of library and information studies, the number of studies utilizing it is steadily increasing.

## **RADICAL FEMINISM**

Radical feminism goes back to the 1960s but some of its philosophy might be seen in the American cultural feminist tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Radical feminism symbolizes the rage of women against male's power and this is stemmed from the second – wave feminism (Collins, 67). Their political structure is built on a male orient philosophy. Their radical work attempts to create a space for women to write, think, and speak their feelings and their personal experiences (68). They investigate the spheres of female sexuality and socialization. Radical feminism has broad influence in tackling issues that are closely affect women's personal lives, physical and mental well – being.

Although radical feminist conceit themselves on being difficult to define, Bonnie Kreps, a radical feminist, provides a significant characterization of radical feminism as "a tendency: which chooses to concentrate exclusively on the oppression of women as women (and not as workers, students, etc.). This segment, therefore, concentrates its analysis on institutions like

love, marriage, sex, masculinity, and femininity. It would be opposed specifically and centrally to sexism, rather than capitalism" (Koedit et all in Collins, 70). Other anthologies such as *Sisterhood is Global* (1970) by Robin Morgan, *Radical Feminism* (1973) by Koedt, Levine, and Rapone do justice to the sheer range and heterogeneity of radical feminist perspectives (69).

Radical feminist thought focuses on gender as a social construct from which all other forms of "material and ideological female oppression" is stemmed (70). Contrary to social feminists and Marxist feminists who believe that Capitalism is the source of women's oppression, radical feminists believe that the source of women's oppression. To explore female oppression, radical feminism focuses on the experiences of individual women in society and considers sexism an important part of their oppression. Another important side of radical feminist thought is that they treat men with suspicion on the bases that they are possible oppressors for women. The most popular slogan that radical feminist held is "the personal is political" which sought to address issues like marriage, childcare, sexuality, health and work to a matter of urgent political concern (Rosemarie2).

Reproduction issue is a diverse issue in the radical feminist thought. Radical feminists claim that biological motherhood drains women physically and psychologically. They believe that women must have access to "reproductive – controlling technologies" and to prevent or terminate their unwanted pregnancies (3, 4). Moving to the modern feminism movement, I attempt to present the most modern feminist's movements that share a lot with the transnational feminist theory. The following are some examples.

### **POSTCOLONIAL, MULTICULTURAL, GLOBAL FEMINISMS AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM**

Postcolonial, Multicultural, and Global feminists aim to show how the "contextual factors shape women's self-understanding as being oppressed or not oppressed. They want women to reject the idea that they are all alike and to refuse the claim that privileged women could speak on behalf of all women (Rosemarie, 8). Postcolonial, Multicultural, and Global feminists focus on the reasons and causes of women's subordination worldwide. These feminists' contribution to feminist thought is clear in their efforts to highlight the differences that exist among women. These differences might present challenges to women's alleged solidarity (7).

In particular, Multicultural feminism focuses on the differences among women who live within the boundaries of one geographical space. On the other hand, Postcolonial feminism focuses on women's status in developing countries. However, countries of the Third World still feel the harmful effects of the nineteenth and twentieth century (8).

Third – wave feminism represents the generation that benefited from the achievements of the second – wave feminism and it emerged in the 1990s. Third – wave feminism started when a young generation of women sought to debate the meanings and relevance of feminism for their late twentieth century lives. Some of these women published works that provide personal accounts of their awakening and show guidance to feminism from a mainstream audience. Some of these publications are: *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995) by Barbara Findlen, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995) by Rebecca Walker, and *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) by Jennifer Bangardner and Amy Richards (Genz, 157).

The new young generation feminists of Third-wave feminism believe that there should be a kind of reconcile between the theoretical frameworks which are built on the foundation of universality, sameness, and scientific methodology and the feminists that had led them to identify any difference. Third – wave feminism embraces the diversity and differences in perspectives among "women" (Arneil, 186). Also, differences between men and women represent an important shift from second to third – feminism.

Third – wave feminists such as bell hooks encourage first world feminism not to be disappointed if they could not achieve friendship with women of color and Third World women. Rather, they should be seeking political relationships with them (Sterba, 186). Third – wave feminists main focus is women seek new identities for themselves in a world full of conflict and self-contradiction and this is where political relations between women would work best. The "woman question" – who is she and what does she want> is the main question that Third – wave feminism is seeking to have been answered (Rosemarie, 9). Bell hooks insists that there are major differences between “bourgeois – women’s liberation,” sisterhood and third – wave feminists since the first one focuses on women supporting each other where the second rejects this support system and offers another type of sisterhood where women acknowledge each other’s’ differences and at the same time use these differences to “accelerate their positive advance” toward the goals they have in common (Sterba, 186).

### **A WOMAN IN WESTERN FEMINISTS' DISCOURSE**

Western feminists' perspectives on issues related to women vary. Some of them agree on one or more and many debates over the same perceptions due to the different approaches they follow and the various feminisms' schools they came from. Monique Wittig believes that the notion of "women" is a myth that has originated from the patriarchal system viewing women as different from men based on their ability to give birth. Wittig asserts that "not only is this conception still imprisoned in the categories of sex (women and men), but it holds onto the idea that the capacity

to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman" (Wittig, 10). So, women in a non – patriarchal sense are not born women but called so by a male-oriented society. Simone de Beauvoir agreed with Wittig when she declares that "One is not born, but comes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society. it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Leighton, 34).

The idea tackled by Wittig and de Beauvoir that women are only set apart from men on the basis of childbirth not only presents a good for feminists and lesbians but ignored other women's cultures and religions. These two Western feminists excluded the needs of Third world women who value motherhood in a culture where childbirth is a positive sign for womanhood and adds a lot of appreciation and care for women who breed children.

To clarify more, the concept of performativity by Judith Butler is performed by certain genders to define their internal structures of female and male being different. Butler asserts that grouping people as “women” or “men” in only taking into account the physical nature of both body types when she says that “the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler & Salhi, 115). Western feminists like Wittig believe that males “the oppressors” have created the term "women" and this is the main goal for females to erase such a degrading term from the existence. Some Western feminists' ideas, and here Wittig is the perfect example, exceeds the notion of women as socially constructed to acknowledge lesbianism as the only concept as Witting states:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (‘forced residence,’ domestic corvee, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual” (Wittig, 20).

Such assertion by Witting is beyond the categories of sex (woman and a man) alleging that lesbian is not a woman, either economically, politically, or ideologically (Duchen, 98).

Western feminists emphasize that the society attributes to be male or female which they consider is just a myth based upon patriarchal ideologies. In doing so, they discard the biological and religious explanation of what defines and reasons sex, sexuality, and gender. All the previous discussion ignore Third world women's experiences, culture, and religion and affirms that Western feminists speak from their ivory tower as elites raising the notion of lesbianism and

neglecting much more important needs of Third world women such as basic human rights like right to life, equal treatment, and access to education.

According to Wittig, nature has nothing to do with gender roles rather it is the economic and political power of men. For her, the economic and political power of man means woman's servitude to men – the oppression of women by men. So, to win women's liberation means destroying the heterosexist social system. For both Wittig and Butler, a female is born into a society that has constructed the ideal "woman". Both of them also question the concept of the body itself as a natural entity and that its functions may be socially constructed exactly like the concepts of men and women.

Another articulation of the female body is drawn by French feminist Helene Cixous who asks women to step out of the darkness and write. She states “a woman without a body, dumb, blind can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” (Warhol & Handle, 351). Addressing women directly, showing men as militant, and resembling women as the servants of the "militant male" depict the thought that she carries as Western feminist which Third world women refute. This thought implies that male is the enemy, the oppressor, and the one that women in compete with. Cixous believes that by writing woman can defuse the female image of suppression and helps them to form a new image that celebrates what the male-dominated society has deemed feminine and submissive.

In terms of oppression, Cixous also claims that the unconscious process of men's control leads to female suppression and the reason why we as women should write is that "We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully thought to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexually modesty, we've been made victims of the old fools frames each one will love the other sex" (Warhol & Herndle, 359). Again, Cixous as a Western feminist totally ignores the Third world women's culture, experience, and religion. It is obvious that Cixous, like all Western feminists that I am tackling in this chapter, universalizes her discourse as if all women in the world have the culture and experience that Western women have. Moreover, she implies the promotion of homosexuality and a woman's right to explore and celebrate her female body.

Such address and claim of Cixous especially the one regarding the women and lesbianism, in particular, might be acceptable in open societies like the Western societies, but even currently in the twenty-one century, such discourse is still considered a taboo and no one dares to open at least in public. One of the few female activists who dare to answer a related is the Egyptian feminist and scholar Nawal El Saadawi in a TV show interview. However, when the TV reporter

asked her if she would reveal or accept the idea of being a lesbian, she hesitated, trembled, and ended up saying that she is not a lesbian and never was.

Cixous reflects Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" when Woolf talks about "the four great women novelists Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. She noted that none of these four writers had a child. On the other hand, Cixous, in particular, sees motherhood as a major catalyst for writing because for her there is a deep connection between the body and writing and being a mother is uniquely feminine. While Cixous asks women not to identify themselves in relation to men as a "signifier" that has always referred back to the opposite "signifier" Woolf critiqued the patriarchal language structure.

The previous random Western feminists I chose to analyze some of their arguments shows that Western feminists in general talk about women as one singular unit. They consider women as one monolithic group who has some historical background, same culture, same religion, same environment, and same experience. They talk to women Western and non-Western in the same voice and the same language presumes that Third world women have the same problems and needs that Western women have and need. Western feminists even assume that all women in the globe have the same power and strength to resist the implicit patriarchal society and the male dominant societies they live in. A more analytical reading of non-Western women by Western feminists would give them a much clearer image of women in the other part of the world and allow them to speak to women of other cultures in a different language that might enhance women's rights in a more efficient way.

### **TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM PERSPECTIVES ON THIRD WORLD WOMEN (ARAB WOMEN ARE THIRD WORLD WOMEN)**

Recently, Third World women and their writing granted more space within first world contexts. However, this inclusion did not challenge the "discursive landscape" that has been assigned to Third World women and their writings as Uma Niyarayan terms "preoccupation" in the dual sense of "concern" and "pregiven locations" (Amireh et. al, 2). However, Mohanty asserts that Third World women's narratives' inclusion within First World context is not evidence of "decentering hegemonic historic and subjectivities". Rather it is how Third World women's work is read, understood, and located institutionally (34). Transnational feminists challenge the universal claim of the Western feminists to speak on behalf and for all women. Postcolonial thinkers and transnational feminists like Mohanty, Rejeswari Sunder Rajan, Nawal El Saadawi, Anandya, Kumar, and Spivak have generated an important rethinking of feminists' thought (Morton, 71).

The most important idea that transnational feminists have challenged is the Western feminists' assumption that all women are the same. Transnational feminists emphasized the necessity of difference in race, class, religion, citizenship, and culture of women. Gayatri Spivak, in particular, refutes the Western feminists' assumption of universalism because neither a universalism nor a representation of all women can be achieved since the Western feminist interests are in conflict with the Third World women's needs (Lemmerich, 9). For Spivak, many Western feminists ignore women's specific cultural, social, and political conditions and this is why Western feminists' universalism is just a failure. Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," demands a stop of the universalizing "Sisterhood". She further rebukes "this matronizing and sororizing of women in developing countries is also a way of silencing the subaltern" (Spivak 2003a, 386). Spivak contends that "if in a contest of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in a shadow" (Spivak 1999, 274). Here she specifically looks at the situation of British occupation in India as an example of white European ideology taking over the other cultures. Writings about a subaltern group and Third world women is a good example of this, from an outsider's perspective (the Western feminists) are not taken seriously by the people they write about because such writings are written without experiencing the culture as an insider. How can an outsider correctly write about or accurately express a culture they do not directly experience?

Another transnational feminist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, has views similar to Spivak's when tackling the feminists' assumption of women's universalism. Mohanty also argues against universalism that Western feminism has advanced. Mohanty contends that Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group with identical interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances (Mohanty 1984, 337).

The experiences of Third World women are diverse and unique especially in the Arab Muslim countries due to the Arabic culture and Islamic religion. Gloria Anzaldúa recounts some of the experiences of Third World women trying to show Western feminists that their assumed universalism is not working and they should stop speaking for third world women and on behalf of them. Anzaldúa recounts Third World women experiences asserting:

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, and our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skill for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic language (Keating, 26, 27).

The second crucial idea that transnational feminists challenge Western feminists on and through which they show their perspectives on Third World women is the Western feminists' claim of being privileged holding the power to lead the world's feminism and speak for Third World women and not to them. According to Spivak Western feminists should learn to stop feeling and acting as privileged feminists so as to understand the situation of other women on the other side of the globe (Lemmerich, 9, 10). Spivak addresses the problem of representation "Other women" by focusing on the relationships between Third World women and Western feminists (Nubile, 34). Mohanty declares that non-Western feminists do not like being categorized as Third World women because they are aware that they are not a "singular" monolithic and paradigmatically victimized subject (Mohanty in Jackie, 106) Considering Third world women a singular monolithic eliminates the differences which are essential in the notion of other women. In a similar debate, Marina Lazerg (2000) asserts that Western feminists' hegemony is based on their assumption that they belong to "perfectible societies" whereas other women belong to traditional or patriarchal societies and these are impervious to change from within (7, 205). However, we cannot hide the fact that Arab Muslim women themselves look at Western feminists and Western women in general as being privileged thinking that Western women enjoy all their rights as humans and as women. Arab World feminists portray Western women as models in understanding and teaching women's rights and this is why many local women's rights organizations seek the support of international women's organization not only in funding but also in policies of how to conduct workshops and training courses on women's rights.

Western feminists' claim that Third World women are victims of men and the patriarchal system that ruled them is another problematic issue that transnational feminists tackle. Western feminists look at women of the Third world as a singular unit who as a group are victims of men as a group. This monolith assumption has been challenged by transnational feminists. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (1999) contend that transnational feminism criticizes not only forms of patriarchal oppression as analyzed by Western feminism but also of feminists' culture hegemony. They give the example of a hegemonic approach that demonizes non- Western, Middle Eastern and Arab Muslim women in particular, and describe them as more oppressive than their First World counterparts (358). Mohanty, on the other hand, criticizes the assumptions made by Western feminists of Third world women's oppression and she notes that this assumption implies Third world women's powerlessness mistakenly "the discursively consensual homogeneity of women as a group... for the historical specific material reality of groups of women". She also states that:

For in the in the context of a first/third world balance of power, feminist analyses which perpetrates and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the 'third – world woman'. Images like the veiled

woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc. These images exist in universal a historical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third – world connections (Mohanty, 1988, 22).

Spivak is another transnational feminist who defends Third world women claiming that they are not victims of their patriarchal system and not oppressed by their husbands and own men. Spivak accuses a victimizing, and compassion of the “benevolent” First world. She studied French feminist Julia Kristeva’s novel *About Chinese Women* published in 1977 and draws attention to stereotypes of the nature of the Chinese life regarding gender and showed how Kristeva ignored to point out anything regarding the white female colonizers in her novel (Spivak 2010, 9). For Spivak herself, Western feminists perpetrate their role of colonizer toward Third world women who serve as a category to these dominant Western feminists. Mama, an African feminist, and scholar challenge the domination of the feminism scene by white Western feminists in international forums. She claims that women from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean think that the domination of Western feminism looks imperialistic. She adds women of these countries see the notion of feminism as something more advanced that Western women had and could import to them (Mama, 12).

However, it is important, to be honest, and mention the fact that many Western feminists try to find a common denominator to reconcile the different experiences of women worldwide. Bell hooks is a significant example of Western feminists who understand that Western feminists, White Western feminists, in particular, have done little to work on the idea of the diversity of women's lived experiences. She also argues that "the political interrogation of the personal is enabling for all women because it challenges each of us to alter our person, our personal engagement (either as victims or perpetrators or both)" (hooks 1989, 22). Also, Amina Mama acknowledged the fact that some Western feminists have responded recently to the Critique of non– Western feminists by advocating the idea that feminist thought should emanate from the least powerful groups of women and not just to keep speaking from the place of the feminist elite position (Mama 12).

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