Beyond Eyes of The West: Intersectional Resisting and Subaltern Voice in South Asian Feminism

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Souzatya Dutta
Master of Arts
Pondicherry University
Department of Politics & International Relations
Email id:duttasouzatya2020@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/ 0009-0004-4742-7164

Afrin Taj
Master of Arts
Sibsagar University
Department of English
Email id: masoomafrin727@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5929-5652

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Abstract:

This article studies a stringent criticism of the Western feminism theory with an argument that the main ideas of this theory often have a limitation and theoretical incompatibility when applied to the social, political, and literary context of the South Asian. By examining the "Big Three" schools of thought liberal, radical, and post-structuralist feminism the paper highlights their universalizing tendencies and inherent biases. It then contrasts these frameworks with a nuanced exploration of South Asian feminist thought, which is inextricably linked to localized struggles against a postcolonial legacy of intersecting oppressions, including caste, class, religion, and state violence. Through the interaction with the theoretical frameworks of Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the incorporation of political and literary works by Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai, the current study explains how the South Asian feminist discourse develops both distinctive and effective models of resistance. The analysis reveals that the female body becomes a site of political subversion, and literature serves as a critical tool for "speaking"

the subaltern voice. The paper concludes that a truly global and effective feminist praxis necessitates a decolonized approach that respects heterogeneity and moves beyond the Western theoretical binary. Methodologically, the study employs comparative discourse analysis and close literary text readings to set Western thought in conversation with South Asian practice. Consulted canonical thinkers and online activism and cyber campaigns by feminists like #MeToo India and Pinjra Tod, the paper illustrates the continued relevance of a Decolonized Feminist Praxis in the Twenty-First Century.

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, South Asian Feminism, Intersectionality, Subalternity, Literary Criticism, Political Analysis

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1. Introduction

While Western feminist theory offers important analytical tools, this paper argues that it poorly captures the complexity of gendered oppression in South Asia (Mohanty 22) where women's lived experience is not structured by a single identity of womanhood but through a complex network of hierarchies of caste, class, religion and nation. The sub-continental gender struggle is inherently inextricable from its post-colonial trajectory (Spivak 294), nationalist rhetoric and highly institutionalised social organisation. This paper makes the case for South Asian feminist thought as articulated in its political movements and an energetic literary culture as a more complex, historically grounded, and contextually appropriate model of resistance.

Such a question becomes of pressing urgency with the contemporary developments: MeToo in India, feminist mobilisations formed by Dalits on social media and women-led citizenship protests like Shaheen Bagh highlight and remind us that the debates between universalist feminism and localised resistance are neither academic nor exhausted and remain intensely politically contentious and ongoing. These case studies of feminisms in South Asia present a rich

rewriting of global discourses of gender, justice and democracy (Rani 74). This paper is also an experimental suffering from multiple engagements-usually postcolonial feminism and queer theory but for this argument it also engages with Dalit feminism, as a means to expose the multiple strand in gendered-resistance in South Asia. Caste and Class: Moving Beyond Gender gets into the absolutely necessary intersections of caste, class, religion and nation - it precisely aims to correct a much-needed theory. In order to proceed, this paper will be presented in a stepwise logical way, starting with an introduction to the theoretical models applicable to this thesis. This will be followed by an analytical discussion including political and literary examples which will illustrate in depth the limitations of Western thought, the power of indigenous paradigms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Western Feminism: The "Big Three" and Their Discontents

Western feminism is traditionally divided into three broad traditions: liberal, radical, and socialist/Marxist feminism, with later movements like post-structuralism either extending or revising these theoretical histories. Liberal feminism, which has historical roots in the 19th-century push for women's suffrage, aims to achieve gender equality within the existing framework of liberal democracy. Proponents of this school emphasize political and legal reform, focusing on securing civil rights, educational opportunities, and economic parity for women (Walby 21). This approach has however been criticised as a white feminism since it represents the interests of white, middle-class women and is oriented towards reform, and as such often do not address the underlying structures of power that go beyond formal legal frameworks (Walby 33).

In stark contrast, radical feminism emerged in the 1960s with the conviction that patriarchy is the most ancient and fundamental form of oppression, serving as a model for all other systems of

domination. Radical feminists argue that the primary site of oppression is not the state or the economy, but the male-dominated social and gender relations themselves. Sexual violence, reproductive rights, and sexual objectification of women are the main issues of the movement which suggested complete restructuring of society to eliminate male dominance (Mohanty 19). Still, the method is strong, but it has been criticized because it makes universalist claims about the character of patriarchy, thus neglecting the delicate intersections with race, class, and nationality.

The socialist and Marxist feminist theoretical models emphasised the materialist roots of the domination of women in the process of capitalist production and classes. These paradigms were used in leftist feminist movements in South Asia, especially in the Tebhaga and Telangana rebellion, but were concentrated on the issue of class, and it was easy to overlook the issues of caste and gender differentiation (Spivak 276).

A third, more abstract, tradition is post-structuralist feminism, which draws on the work of thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. This school of thought challenges the idea of a fixed, biological, or universal essence of "womanhood". Instead, it views gender as a social construct, a performance, and a discursive effect of language and power relations. Post structuralist feminists like Hélene Cixous and Julia Kristeva challenge the phallocentric nature of language and dominant cultural discourses, and in doing so demonstrate how these processes uphold masculine norms. Although this methodology provides a nuanced critique of essentialist theories, it has faced substantial obstacles in its application to large scale political initiatives; the fixation on deconstructing allegedly universal categories can sometimes become suicidal to mass action and solidaristic praxis.

2.2 South Asian Feminist Thought: The Contours of a Local Praxis

The feminist movements of South Asia have their history, which is closely connected with the realities of colonialism and postcolonialism. These movements date back to the attempts of enlightened social reformers in the British colony of India in the nineteenth century, who tried to eliminate such practices as sati (immolation of widows), child marriage, or mutilation of widows. This male-led reformism later gave way to broader political mobilization as women became integral to anti-colonial and nationalist struggles. From the first girls school that Savitribai Phule established in India in the 1840s, to mass involvement of women in the movements of Gandhi, the fight for women's rights began to overlap with the fight for national independence (Jahan 58).

This history had led to a feminist praxis quite different qualitatively from its Western forebear. The structural interconnection of gender with nationalism dominates the very prominent aspect of the South Asian feminist theory. It looks for examples of how nationalist leaders used traditional gender binaries to re-assert women a symbolic meaning as well as politically mobilise marginalised sexual minorities, in ways that the first wave of Western feminism had first largely ignored (Kabeer 112). Further, South Asian feminisms are subject to inevitably bumping up against the very deep rooted hierarchies of caste and class that are often bracketed out of Western frameworks. Dalit feminism for example, critiques the caste-blindness of mainstream Indian feminism and argues that violence based on caste and social marginalisation faced by the Dalit women can not be understood through one purview of gender. The movement has focussed on local issues including dowry related violence, sex-selective abortion and custodial rape that are products of the local socio-political context (Rani 74).

A further example of this indigenous stream of thought can be found in the groundbreaking Humayun Azad's Naree (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 1992; republished by OUP), which was a leading feminist critique in Bengali. Though his work was controversial and banned for a time

for its radical content, Azad broke down the patriarchal foundations of South Asian society and even challenged the gendered legacy of literary icons such as Rabindranath Tagore. This proves that there is a strong, local feminist critique. The power of Azad's work is itself evidence of its subversiveness; it was briefly banned by the state for its radical content, a ban which was only overruled in a high court challenge, evidence of the troubled relationship between subversive feminist knowledge and state power.

2.3 The Postcolonial Feminist Intervention

The theoretical terrain between Western and South Asian feminism is most often imagined in the terms of post-colonial feminism, which began in the 1980s as a bold critique of western mainstream feminism's universalizing tendencies. In her landmark essay "Under Western Eyes," feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that by representing women in the Global South as an undifferentiated and homogenous population of victims of patriarchal culture, Western feminists engage in an act of "feminist colonialism" (Mohanty 4). This framework imposes externalised definitions of non-Western society, erases the diversity of historical and cultural specificity of women's lives, and ensures that the key to female emancipation stays in the hands of Western feminists. Mohanty's work asks for a decentring of western knowledge and for a re-consideration of solidarity as not an imposition of values vertically but as a relation of horizontal collaboration.

Equally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies Collective, invented the term subaltern-a term for marginalised and un-generalizable groups that lack access to citizenship and formal political representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critically assesses whether marginalised women can ever be truly included within a Eurocentric intellectual framework (Spivak 287). Spivak also coined the term "strategic essentialism," which implies temporary solidarity among different

groups for the purpose of collective action. While she later distanced herself from the idea due to overuse, it still remains an analytically valuable concept for feminist coalition-building across South Asia. Both Mohanty and Spivak emphasise a more complex formulation that is reflexively aware of its own positionality, and that acknowledges the heterogeneity of women's experiences across the world.

Mohanty and Spivak's seminal critique has been eagerly taken up and developed by a new generation of scholars who have gone beyond the diagnosis of the problem to the articulation of new, localised models. For instance, Anupama Rao's seminal work on Dalit feminism has proved important in critiquing the caste blindness of mainstream Indian feminism which has historically deemed it irrelevant to explain the structural oppression of caste in the lives of Dalit women (Rao 92). Similarly, Sanchari Mukherjee's work on the #MeToo movement in India shows how Western categories of sexual harassment and consent necessarily have to be re-calibrated and subverted through local relations of power, precarity and social hierarchies.

The theoretical and empirical interest in 'feminist colonialism' is now comparatively intense, indicating that this can hardly be considered a unified or exhausted field, as work on LGBTQ+ rights in South Asia, for instance, must deal with complex religious and juridical spheres that complicate western secular-liberal binaries. Emerging from a modern movement of local resistance and critical cultural analysis, this collection of essays reminds us that the project of decentring Western knowledge production is not over.

3. Research Question:

In which ways do manifestations of South Asian feminist thought, whether political or social or literary, reveal the limitations of Western feminism theories, and what do they suggest instead as new models of resistance?

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research is based on the ideas of postcolonial feminist theory which argues that gender oppression cannot be separated from other systems of power, such as caste, class, religion and the legacies of colonialism (Mohanty 7). The framework provides an overview of analysis that shifts from the universalism of western feminism towards localized, intersectional understandings of resistance.

A comparative discourse and textual analysis is adopted. It requires two steps:

1. Deconstruction: The discovery of the fundamental principles of all the major Western feminist schools (liberal, radical and post-structuralist) with the aim of establishing the theoretical boundaries and inherent shortcomings of the schools as is evident through the literature review (Spivak 284).

2. Reconstruction: An analysis of South Asian feminist political thought and literary production applying these frameworks to highlight the mismatches and propose an alternative more subtle approach to analysis.

The case studies and the texts have been specifically selected as representative. Texts were chosen for this canon list for their inclusion in the feminist literature and their applicability to intersectional problems in South Asia. Writings by authors like Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai were chosen because they directly addressed the questions of state violence and caste patriarchy and subaltern agency (Devi 108). Correspondingly, the teasing out is also done on bodies such as Dalit feminism which is considered to be seminal in questioning the caste-blind analyses and in its central role in creating a unique South Asian feminist praxis.

This is why the chosen case studies are not in vain, Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai. The stories of Devi expose how the state is violated against the subaltern women and the prose of Chughtai challenges the morality and sexual suppression of the middle classes. Both authors are

the representatives of various yet complementary feminist resistance registers and thus, can be regarded as the best interlocutors to push the limits of the western theory.

Although ethnographic and activist feminist research is equally essential, this paper will be restricted to political thought and literature to bring out discursive fights of gender. This methodology is not meant to impose the Western theory on South Asia but to have the two traditions engage each other whereby later one would envision the latter to attack and correct the former.

As researchers located in Political Science and Literary Studies, we take up this analysis with an awareness of our positionality, attempting to decenter Western epistemological practice while instead centering South Asian marginalized voices.

5. Analytical Discussion

5.1 The Lived Experience of Intersectionality vs. Western Universalism

Within the context of Western feminism, particularly during early waves, there were implicit assumptions regarding the existence of a universal "woman" with universal problems and solutions as implied by Early Makers (Hawkesworth 803). This approach prioritized gender as the primary, if not singular, axis of oppression. For a white, middle-class woman in the West, this framework may have been sufficient to address the denial of civil rights or workplace inequality. However, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, this approach is arbitrary and limiting when applied globally, as it fails to account for the lived realities of women whose identities are inseparably shaped by intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, and religion (Mohanty 18).

South Asian feminist thought, by definition, has always been from the intersectionality point. The lives of women in the sub-continent cannot be divorced from the caste to which they belong, the class into which they were born or the religious community of which they are a part. For example, the fight of a Dalit woman is not only a fight on the basis of gender, but she suffers

from a complex of gendered violence, caste discrimination and economic marginalisation that cannot even be fought with the platform of liberal or radical feminism that is based on the basis of gender only (Rani 72). Mainstream Indian feminism has been historically accused of ignoring the struggles of poorer and lower caste women and has been described as too focused on issues faced by privileged, middle class women. From the political mobilisation of women during the Quit India Movement to movements against dowry violence, the history of feminist movements in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India is a history of addressing a variety of causes. These articles point to the fact that the issues confronting women in South Asia are complex and need to be analysed from a multi-dimensional perspective which recognises the fact that feudal traditions, tribal codes and the misinterpretation of religious principles have contributed to the position of South Asian women.

Thus in the South Asian context, the feminist Western distinction between public and private and the powerful slogan "the personal is political" also acquire a new meaning. Many South Asian societies are not so clearly noticeable in the differentiation between public and private life. The private sphere is not merely a site of domestic patriarchy, it is too frequently a symbolic site of contestation for national honor and cultural identity. Women's bodies are part of the broader economy that turns them into commodities through conjugal coercion or violence in the name of family and community honour, blurring the distinction between domestic subordination and national policy. Domestic violence against women is not an internal conflict, but a direct outcome of prevalent major forms of feudal practise and state-sponsored patriarchy. If the private is already and in an obvious way, a site of state and national political contestation, a framework attempting to reveal the political character of the private one is less useful. This requires a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between domestic, community and national patriarchy which work to oppress women. This requires more complex understanding of combined action of national, collective and domestic patriarchies and the oppression of women.

There are actual examples of this kind of dynamic in the current feminist movement in South Asia. The Shaheen Bagh sit-in organised largely by Muslim women in 2019 demonstrates how the space of care and motherhood private, was made in a sense into a political space of dissent of the Citizenship Amendment Act. Similarly, the birth of Dalit feminisms on Twitter not only barges into elitism of mainstream feminism but also caste patriarchy, signalling an entirely new weapons of fight strategies. These movements, and the theoretical critiques of South Asian feminist thinkers, are a manifestation of these theoretical problems and advance them one step further. This is borne out in other ways by developments in South Asia, which were similar. With the refrain "Mera Jism Meri Marzi," the Aurat march in Pakistan is both against the repression of the state and by the Islamist clericals and the direct repression of women's bodies by men. Women's garment workers' unions in Bangladesh have mobilised on issues of wages, safety and dignity demonstrating the strong levels of interlinking between labour rights and Feminist organising in the region. Recent hashtags movements such as #MeTooIndia and #DalitLivesMatter have been constructed examples of the very relevance of intersectional feminist praxis in digital spaces.

Table 1: Comparison of Western and South Asian Feminist Frameworks.

Feature	Western Feminist Theory	South Asian Feminist Thought	Key Mismatches
Primary Locus of Oppression	Gendered Patriarchy	Intersections of Caste, Class, Religion, and Nation	Overlooking of racial, ethnic, and social hierarchies.

Feature	Western Feminist Theory	South Asian Feminist Thought	Key Mismatches
Central Analytical Category	"Woman" as a monolithic category	"Subaltern woman" with heterogeneous identities	Imposition of a universal identity on a diverse group.
Historical Development	Sequential "waves" (First, Second, Third)	Overlapping strands (leftist, nationalist, social reform)	Failure to account for concurrent, context-specific struggles.
Relationship to the State	Site for legal/political reform; target of critique	A site of violence, a co-opted ally, and a tool of patriarchal nationalism	A singular focus on state reform neglects its role as an oppressor.
Forms of Resistance	Legislative change, consciousness-raising, discursive deconstruction	Direct action, re-appropriation of mythology, literary realism	Disconnection between abstract theory and on-the-ground struggle.
Key Theorists/Texts	Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, Firestone	Mohanty, Spivak, Devi, Chughtai	Disregard for scholarship and experiences from the Global South.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis.

5.2 Beyond the Binary: Aesthetic Traditions and Queer Narratives

Such resistance to oppositional binaries is not only political and social in its meaning; it reaches far beyond these categories into cultural and aesthetic practise. South Asian feminism often speaks to this with productive repertoires of indigenous aesthetic forms such as the affective dimension in rasa theory – the power of a communally felt emotion – or in the transformual resistance to patriarchy, in Bhakti and Sufi poetry and its metaphoric spirituality (Mohammad 523), and in collective performative, not discursive contestation. Furthermore, new stories have become increasingly involved with identities beyond the gender binary, directly challenging biological determinism inherent within both colonial and traditional norms. Some engaging illustrations of entrenchment of gender fluidity in South Asian orders of things in women such as Arundhati Roy in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, activists in the hijra communities and their pathologisation by the colonial and post-colonial legal regimes (Hossain 144). This reclaiming of non-binary and queer identities, and expression of radical resistance to universalizing tendencies of Western feminism, aims at appropriating (and recuperating) accounts of resistance to norms by developing movement and intersectionality centred frameworks (Mukherjee 350).

5.3 The Female Body as Space of Political Struggle and Subversion

While Western radical feminism has emphasised the regaining of female bodily autonomy and the resisting of sexual objectification (i.e. framing these issues in terms of individual rights and agency), South Asian feminist thinking re-shapes the female body as a powerful site of collective and political resistance against state power itself (Mishra 38). The body becomes a battle ground not just for gender equality, but for national, political and cultural identity. One of the best examples of this theory can be found in an in-depth study of Mahasweta Devi‘s classic short story, ―Draupadi‖.

Set in the background of the Naxalite movement in 1970s West Bengal, this is the story of the revolutionary Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman. Even her name is ironic, reminding us of the mythical Draupadi of the Hindu epic The Mahabharata. In the epic Draupadi‘s faith is passive and when she is ritually defrocked, she is rescued by miracle. Devi‘s Dopdi Mejhen is, however, not a passive divinity. When she is captured, beaten, tortured, and brutally raped by police officers, it is not an act of violence in the name of her physical body; it is an act of mass political terrorism designed to humiliate her and discourage other women from participating in the resistance (Dey 128).

Dopdi‘s final resistance is the saddest part in the entire story. She refuses to cover her battered naked body, and instead confronts the high-ranking officer Senanayak and all her captors with her violated body. By refusing to submit to female shame as expected by society, she is changing the meaning of her body from a place of victimisation to a place of resistance (Mohammad 525).

Similarly, the novels and especially the collection of short stories, Kaghzi Hai Pairahan, of Ismat Chughtai, repeatedly question the morality of the middle-class from the inside. Chughtai‘s defiance of Victorian prudishness, a colonial imposition, through unadorned female sexuality-which is often graphic-is a powerful statement. Films such as Lihaaf (The Quilt), exposing female desire not so much, but through a critique of the patriarchal and social institutions that restrain women from this potential desire. It is not only that Chughtai argues for liberal rights, but she makes a blistering denunciation of a patriarchal society, which keeps women under house arrest, while claiming to worship them. Again, the proof of this critique lies heavily on the line of cultural particulars, and the work is a powerful local feminist text which would fail to gain the same charge under an exclusively western construction.

To demonstrate just how contemporary such highly localised systems of thought still have relevance, we can look into the work of contemporary writers Meena Kandasamy and Bama. Their writing on the experiences of Dalit women – a theme almost non-existent in western literature – has been characterised by an autobiographical, visceral approach revealing the stark and violent intersections of caste and gender. Far from trying to insert themselves into a global literary canon, their work instead, through the power of their words, confronts the reader with the violence and humiliation that would be ignored by a universalist feminism. Arundhati Roy's novels, which have an unmistakable political thrust, are also exemplary in that they show the progress of women, themselves, to be inextricably linked to anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and environmental movements. This shows that feminist politics in the area is aligned with other liberation struggles.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Limitations of Western Feminist Theory

The analysis contained within the paper shows that western, feminist theory, though impactful, does not sufficiently account for the complexity of gender relations and resistance in South Asia, owing to its universalizing, gender-specific, and often de-historicized efforts that are contradictory to the postcolonial context of the subcontinent (Mohanty 5). In short, the normative experiences of women in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, cannot be simply defined by a singular experience violence towards their gender, but by the interactions among caste, class, religion, and the state, requiring an intersectionality lens (Rani 76).

6.2 South Asian Feminist Praxis: Contextualized Resistance

South Asian feminist thought politically and literarily—offers a robust and contextually aware alternative. It provides unique and powerful paradigms for understanding localized struggle, such

as the re-appropriation of myth in Mahasweta Devi‘s Draupadi to transform the female body into a site of political subversion, and the use of literary realism by writers like Ismat Chughtai and Bapsi Sidhwa to give voice to the subaltern experience (Devi 131). Contemporary writers such as Meena Kandasamy and Bama foreground Dalit women‘s struggles, while Arundhati Roy‘s novels link feminist politics to broader anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and environmental battles. These indigenous forms of resistance are not merely reactive; they are creative, transformative, and deeply rooted in the cultural and historical landscape.

6.3 Implications for Global Feminist Solidarity

The conclusion of this research is a call to action for a new, collaborative feminist praxis that is not imperialistic but inclusive. The practical implication of this study is that global feminist solidarity cannot be confined to symbolism: it requires supporting campaigns for Dalit women‘s land rights, challenging caste-based violence, and understanding how religious fundamentalism and environmental degradation are feminist issues from a South Asian perspective. For theorists and activists from the Global North, it also requires epistemic humility: it requires decentering their frameworks, making space for diminished movements and knowledges from the Global South, and amplifying them, as opposed to remapping prescriptive models of liberation.

Finally, this paper is also, in part, looking ahead; South Asian feminist orientations can produce new ways of thinking about global conversations on climate justice, queer rights, and technology ethics, which are still largely dominated by the West. The goal is not to discard a Western feminism, but to create a decolonized (or decolonizing) practice of horizontal solidarity, a ―neighborly‖ inclusion, and a respect for differences. Global feminisms must not only critique universalist binaries, but also learn from South Asian local struggles and literatures to produce solidarity that is collective, transformative, and just.

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