

POSTSTRUCTURALISM, POWER AND THIRD WORLD FEMINISM

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The question here is, is the Third world women's movement just adopting western paradigms and foreclosing other avenues of conceptualising and strategising that are more indigenised, plural and progressively enlightening? Can the postmodern and poststructuralist world-view create waves or ripples, and thereby positioning Third World feminism in a particular context and outside the expectations of western feminism? The conclusion in this paper would say that the answers to the above questions are in the affirmative. In reaching such a conclusion the paper will discuss the current thinking about postmodernism and poststructuralism and pick up some of these ideational insights or gaps in analysing the Third World feminist swell. The purpose is not to accept or reject the poststructuralist world-view but to use it as an axis to generate thinking on the characteristics of power and nascent feminism in the non-western world. There are three expressions of feminism in the Third World today. At the level of political organizing the concentration is on achieving civil liberties, though Third World feminist movements do not necessarily have similar experiences as western feminism. Secondly, there is an expression of overt "surface resistance" that counter western assumptions about liberation, which at the outset appear to cow freedom, but is in itself empowering. Thirdly, an expression of female power in its banal and indigenised form which will inherently regulate and provide for sexual complementarity, but is weak and marginal as it will always be in competition with the more centred, legalistic and hegemonic powers. All three are important enough to constitute the consciousness that locates, rather than displaces feminist power in the Third World, though the efficacy of each expression in itself cannot be overemphasised.

Before proceeding, a brief overview of what is postmodernism and poststructuralism (said to be distinct from postmodernism, though not entirely unconnected to it) is discussed here. Postmodernism may be the manifestation of an intellectual guilt which is the legacy of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It would also not be too difficult to dismiss current postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking as symptomatic of Western tyranny upon the world, dismissing it as nothing more than eclectic art and literary forms.¹ Nevertheless could one perhaps find the rhetorics and substance of the debate useful at least in gauging whether the form and degree of anti-sexist politicising here in Malaysia and the Third World has taken a similar, or different dimension than in the west?

The European Enlightenment was said to be the turning point which grounded the discovery of the idea that the individual is self-determining, self-constituting, supremely conscious of his reason and autonomously a subject-agent of his own history (western feminists claim that they were never part of this discourse, which was male-centric). Postmodernists say that this has been the discourse of liberal-humanism of which all colonised peoples, women and subalterns or the dispossessed have been invited to partake. In the earlier phase of colonialism they failed to be incorporated because the discourse was only given the semblance of liberty and universalism, while material conditions such as colonial institutions or the capitalist economy tended to exclude the participation of all other, non-white, non-male subjects. Paradoxically, as this discourse has been so enshrined as the universal truth, the others endeavour to possess it and thereby carry an illusion that with it, their dispossession would then end.² The postmodern critique of this is that if the dispossessed continue to seek the restoration of their autonomy this way, the appropriative powers of the dominant discourse will only be confirmed. The Third World Other, including women will continue their subsumation, by "borrowing the tools of that discourse, tools which serve only to reduplicate the first subjection which they effect." (O'Hanlon, 1988: 218).

At a practical level the postmodernist project has found a legitimacy due to the dwindling successes of many totalising movements, be it Western democracy, socialism, or capitalism. The basis of their failures has been their hegemonising tendencies to appropriate and represent every subject in a singular unitary image. It is further said that *difference* has not been acknowledged, thus subjecting the individual to a cultural and authoritative centrality. Besides, Reason, the basis of this liberal-humanist enterprise is far from incapable of promoting all shades of political persuasions and structures that have succeeded in exaggerating rather than overcoming human problems and crises.

The metanarratives that poststructuralist scholars refer to are those bred by a rationalist though benevolent framework with the end goal of liberation as some sort of ultimate truth.³ Furthermore, they are also tinged by phallocentrism with the western man as saviour.⁴

Thus the project to reverse this is the postmodern project, which does not subscribe to any foundational politics, will resist centralization, will not claim privilege and exclusivity to narrate what is truthful, and will look to the margins to deconstruct the Grand scripts. Concepts such as "unlearning one's privilege", and "decentering the subject", are all influencing critical theories and praxis today.

This critique is useful in checking knowledge and political practice claiming universal authority, as well as in its encouraging of all silences, marginals, and subalterns to stake a claim to history (what is known as the decentering of the subject). The idea of "different but equal", and "plural but not communal" have all become acceptable again in the political agenda which previously adopted unity and integration through universalization as the more popular calling (Fraser & Nicholson, 1988: 390-1). In feminism, for example, postmodernist political practice allows the abandonment of the "imitative" tendency to adopt feminist practices of the west, and through postmodernism one can now culturally explicate one's own unique or distinct anti-sexist praxis.

Power, Self-Determination and Personal Rights

Despite this shift in western intellectual exchanges, much of the activism of Third World feminists is defined by the modern agenda, and modernisation as the unstated destiny. Their real and metaphoric confrontation is to resist subjugation arising out of pre-modern forces (Islamic fundamentalism, parochialism, obscurantism, etc.). This is the distinct feature of Third World feminist movements which may be the separating denominator between them and western feminist movements. Western feminism was not seen as a modernising force. It merely characterised the modern revolution and tried to redistribute and shift the balance of power according to gender within the modern framework. Reversals, replacements and equalization of roles became the overriding issues of contemporary feminism the world over. As is always realised, reverse phallocentrism is not the answer to women's liberation. Gender equity in all spheres of economic and political life is achievable in the long run though this will not resolve overarching global problems such as persistent wars, poverty or ecological disasters. Hence the attractiveness of postmodern politics and culture among western feminists who recognise the need to question all essentialisms and hegemonic movements which could not live up to grand claims and truths.

While Third World feminists also deliberate on similar issues and attempt to aspire towards female equity, a large and important part of their struggle is devoted to the institution of modern political and legal reforms. Third world feminism is a modernising movement -- a battle for the recognition of the humanist philosophy, through a legal-rational discourse and the realisation of individual human rights. In the east, the humanist revolution and the feminist movement are colliding at the same moment in history. Feminism in the east even if inspired by the west is concentrating on another agenda and leaving its mark differently here but most importantly, providing a potent force in shaping the modern revolution, which left out women and other minorities.

One of the reasons why Third World feminist movements have taken on a different character from western deconstructionist feminism is

because of the prevalence of blatant repression. While it cannot be denied that the Panoptic power (see discussion next section) is also present in less industrialised societies, we see a more regular and unabashed exercise of overt power being used upon women in many Third World countries. The idea of power being sovereign and transparent on the part of the holders and obedience being unquestioned on the part of the subjects based on the old model is more observable than power which is exercised diffusely and self-subjugatingly under the new model (Taylor, C; 1986; 83). The Third World is still so full of the old model of power while the First World is perhaps more characterised by the other model. It is easier to find numerous examples of sovereign power exercised in the Third World just as much as it is to find examples of the other versions in the west.

Women in Pakistan, Algeria and Malaysia are still subjected to direct domination, either through juridico-discursive means (both civil and Islamic Laws differentiate and/or discriminate on the basis of gender), or through violence-terror (political rapes in Pakistan, Kashmir, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Myanmar). The exercise of violence-terror to legitimise the sovereign authority of men over women has taken on a disturbing trend in Pakistan for example. The latest attempt to terrorise and silence political opposition has been through the rape of women connected with the opposition. Two women, both having links to the PPP (People's Progressive Party of Benazir Bhutto) were recently gang-raped by policemen, one in a police station, the other in her own house (Newsline, Lahore; 1991).

The recent case of the Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen who was issued a warrant of arrest in June 1994 for allegedly making statements which called for a revision of the Holy Quran is another striking example. Her alleged statements had provoked many Islamic groups to stage demonstrations against her, stirring up a campaign calling for a trial and her hanging. The events and actions illustrate a human rights case rather than a distinctly feminist cause. It was true that the protestors represented the Islamic male dominant voice, but this was made vocal and legitimate only because the foundations for human rights and ordinary women's presence in the civil sphere were not strongly established in that society. Salman Rushdie was after all a

man and was ahead in provoking the same sentiments among the same groups who would be threatened by any dissenting voice, be it male or female. It seems that the feminist revolution in South Asia came first among certain women, who are after that faced with the daunting task of overhauling the great forces of sacrosanctity, instead of all this happening the other way around among western feminists.

Faced with a monolithic male-empowered situation, women have two choices in such a society. One is to counter the hegemonic sacred cow with an equally dominating means - the appeal to reason and rationality and a respect for free thoughts and expression. The other way is to withdraw and remain silent. However, having been schooled in feminist ideas they will seek recourse through the juridico process, thereby inducing the entry of women into the civil sphere. Third World feminists can only resist pre-modern sexism of the more overt kind through activating political moves founded on the assumed notion of universal constructs, and the use of the legal-rational-bureaucratic apparatus.

An example closer home is the passing of the Domestic Violence Act (DVA). It was considered a triumph of feminist organisation and pressure by many activists here when the DVA was finally passed by the Malaysian Parliament in May 1994. Nevertheless not many are optimistic that the DVA as a legal instrument can promise total recourse to domestic violence. Questions, such as, will more women now come out to dare their husbands to stand trial will be asked. Will husbands actually get convicted? Will the incidence of domestic violence be reduced or even controlled with the existence of this Act? As of now it is too early to provide answers if at all it be possible, as the Act itself has not been rested by the courts. While the substantial issue as to whether the Act is the resolution to gender oppression may be left as an untackled agenda of Malaysian feminism, the motions will still go on to fine tune the legal clauses and accomodation of the Act. For instance the language of the DVA is presently deviously couched to avoid transgressing the commonly acknowledged clause of wife-beating in Islam. Although there are debates within the Islamic circle on this issue, the more authoritative position maintains that the Muslim man does have certain limited rights to beat his wife under extreme

conditions of disobedience or refusal to have sex. The wording to accomodate this clause within the DVA is stated in one of the definitions of domestic violence which is,

compelling the victim by force or threat to engage in any conduct or act, sexual or otherwise, from which the victim has a right to abstain.

Has a Muslim woman the right to abstain from sex? This issue is left open yet suggestive in the definition above. Feminists here have rallied to protest the implications of the above definition but without succeeding in getting the message through. Human rights are again the issue and will no doubt continue to dominate Malaysian and Third World feminist agendas.

Third World women are still vigorously fighting for legal self-determination unlike western women who by law are equal citizens. A group of feminists in Pakistan are right now asserting themselves against Islamic Fundamentalism because they fear a reversion to a dominant anti-rational discourse, thereby denying all rights which women were given either by default or design by the country's western colonisers.⁵ In their words, "Religious fundamentalism not only does not allow this rationality to emerge and gain strength, but works against it by giving supernatural sanction to the fanaticism and the retrogressive tendencies inherent in all religions. It is essential that this global phenomenon not only be checked but that progressive and 'rational' forces struggle to reverse this trend."⁶

The situation in Algeria warrants a look. In 1991 when Algeria had its first free, multiparty elections since 1962, the Islamic Front for Salvation (FIS) captured 24% of the vote but gained more than half of the parliamentary seats. There was a lot of resistance against the party including the overt demonstration of violence by the army.⁷ The National Assembly was dissolved. Women were said to have protested in large numbers because the FIS was in the process of passing an anti-suffragist decree, allowing men to vote for and on behalf of the women in their families.⁸ In Tunisia the situation is also about fighting for civil rights. One hundred and seventeen women recently

signed a petition appealing for democracy, freedom and civil liberties. This kind of appeal will probably not be promoted among western feminists as there is no question of those rights not being present in western democracies. However, the consequence of having such appeals for these Tunisian women was grave. The women were subsequently harassed by the state and the police and accused by a cabinet minister of being intellectual frauds out to deceive the public. International appeal was sent out to protest the government's actions and to lend support to the cause. (WLUML pamphlet, July 6, 1994).

The basic point highlighted by the feminist-inspired civil rights movements above is the revelation that the rights being fought for are something that western women have taken for granted, i.e. constitutionally guaranteed individual liberties and personal freedom. As we have seen in Malaysia, Pakistan, Algeria and Tunisia, pluralities of expression based on the bonds of religion and gender have surfaced and become intractable features of modernising Muslim societies. The discourse of rationality and self-determination has been the epistemological paradigm of the feminists while that of the religious fundamentalists, inviolable truths and submission to a higher essence (man towards God and women towards men). As with all other forms of movements, the varying discourses represent political interests, constantly competing for legitimacy, status and power; the site for this contest being the subjectivity of the individual who is an active but not necessarily a sovereign protagonist (Weedon, 1987: 41).

However, assuming that one is a sovereign protagonist, a Muslim, Algerian or Pakistani Feminist would probably, consciously or unconsciously think this way; "I had made a decision that I would be nothing, but, the autonomous subject-agent, self-constituting and free to self-determine my wants, and I would expect every **reasonable** person to also see the logic of this position!" However, as a member of a fundamentalist Islamic sect, she would probably express these thoughts: "The Quran is the basis of Truth-Knowledge; in order to regain our belonging we must reject western metanarratives that only believe in the supremacy of man. For us, there is a higher being, God. We create our own histories, based on a sublime and transcendental tradition which the West had rejected." The position of the latter can

be seen as the dissenting and alternative voice against the former and much more in tandem with the vision of the postmodern condition. However, the latter, which is an anti-humanist paradigm has more of a tendency to impose and centralise, at least at this point of the Islamic movement's historical ascendancy with its unabashed use of violent threats and means. This is not to say that once entrenched it would not also adopt more benevolent means of exercising its control. Islam in its heyday exhibited liberal attitudes towards knowledge generation; there was scientific, architectural and creative achievements. Islam also came into the Malay Peninsula, through a benevolent process. For example, it was adopted by the Malay juridical system without it being successful in totally undermining *adat* or customary laws.

On the one hand, it is the onus of postmodernists to forcefully encourage the feminist movement because it will then counter the impulse of another force in its tendency to narrate dominantly (Islamic Fundamentalists through the Islamic State). However, the feminist agenda would lead to yet another essentialism and meta-narrative that will inevitably seek to dominate and subvert all other impulses. Western deconstructionist feminists might have found the project to decentre itself from the dominant, white, male rationalist discourse to be the most urgent as that paradigm is found to be inherently destructive. Unfortunately, or fortunately, Islamic fundamentalists in non-western societies also share the same sentiments and are also countering that same white, rationalist discourse, although perhaps they are less concerned about the male-ness aspect. That leaves the non-western feminists who will, for the time being be involved in a different project; they have to resist the non-white male, non-rationalist discourse which is increasingly becoming the authoritative voice outside the western hemisphere articulating the new metanarrative of the anti-west movement. There is thus an ironical situation where Third World feminists outside the west will be the only ones stridently using the western rationalist discourse to battle against both the non-white male and anti-humanist forces.

The postmodern influence on Third World Feminist practice today if assimilated in its extreme (especially its nihilistic and anti-humanist) tendency, will surely nip any self-determination movement in its bud.

At this point the political drift is that both women and indigenous peoples, need to partake or "borrow" the tools of rationalist discourse in order to possess autonomy. For Third World feminists absorbed in expressing their aspirations through the civil instrument, there is little necessity to seek for an epistemology buried in the vicissitudes of culture, history or psychoanalytic recesses in order to comprehend the question of agency. For them it would be difficult to imagine any community not touched by the modern project, so much so that modern tools of articulation and representation will inevitably have to be used. They are being used as a means to get into a debate, dialogue, discourse or confrontation with countervailing forces rather than as an end in itself. These movements will be comfortable with the fact there is still the question now as to whether the modern project has even arrived in some communities, and that in some others, it may even be an incomplete agenda.⁹ Despite this comfort, human-rights-oriented Third World feminist groups are still uncomfortably situated in the present Third World political and cultural order, given its creeping, though selectively, xenophobic tendencies. In non-western popular, and often times, official discourse, there is no running away from the belief that the feminist ideology is an imported commodity.¹⁰

Emancipation sans Prohibition: Personal Appearance and the Freedom of Expression

The second prevalent expression of Third World feminist consciousness has to be looked at in relation to some experiences of the west in its postmodern condition. The condition of postmodernity generates a lot of doubt about the rationalist, self-determining person able to resolve problems logically and find solutions through scientific reasoning. Why is this so? One way of understanding this predicament is the notion of the Panoptic syndrome that has thrown the notion of the self-determining, conscious subject-agent, and autonomous humanist into a state of disarray.

Foucault used the analogy of the prison system to demonstrate the Panopticon¹¹ in which there was surveillance without the prisoner being able to see the guards, situated on the towers around the prison.

The diffusion of Panopticonism actually amplifies power for the holders while at the same time enhancing, rather than curbing social movements. In this situation, self-control, self-censorship and discipline works to subjugate (and then normalize) the subjects rather than through the exercise of any blatant measures by the State (upon citizens) or men (upon women).

Panoptic power is easily observable in many everyday situations in Europe. In many European cities for example, one boards a bus without having a bus conductor to pay the fare to. Bus tickets are purchased at the vending machine by the bus stand. The ticket is inserted into another slot in the machine to have the time and day validated as the bus arrives. Since there is no bus conductor, the validity of the tickets is seldom checked, especially whether the tickets have been correctly paid or whether at all anyone has any tickets. This system of "trust" works because of the positive impact of the Panopticon. People conform to this arrangement because they believe in the system and would not wish to deviate from the standard practice.

Another more striking but negative example of this Panopticon power is the condition of western liberated woman in capitalist societies. This notion of power described by an American writer, Naomi Wolf in her book, *The Beauty Myth* (1991), creates a condition in western cultures, which women's liberation notwithstanding, still constrains women. Despite evidence that equal rights have been sufficiently won in most areas of public life, women's subjugation has persisted through an insidious process called the 'beauty myth'. Men are no longer visibly active as subjects conspiring to dominate women. This time around women become their own subject-agents sustaining male privilege while circumscribing their own autonomy as, "...the beauty myth was perfected to checkmate power at every level in individual women's lives." (Wolf, 1991: 19). An example of the activation of this myth is the circulation of a pervasive image of what women should look like, even if they are no longer the slavish domestic counterparts of men. The protean drive to be everything (brilliant careerist, mother, wife, lover) is also stretched to include a certain conception of "beauty". However, in the present context, Wolf argues that the myth is not

about prescribing **appearance** but **behaviour**. Women are expected to have big breasts and small hips, to be extremely thin; they are expected to look the same before and after childbirth, they are not expected to have wrinkles in old age, they should be maternal to their children but never look like mother, to be thin is healthy, to be fat is sick. To achieve that "ideal", women subject themselves to painful exercises, semi-starvation diets, breast implants, expensive cosmetics and dangerous surgeries. These trends have created casualties out of women. The number of women suffering from all forms of psychotic disturbances (traced to diets), deaths due to surgery (liposuction) and physical impairments (dubious safety of silicone implants) has been on the rise. The remarkable aspect of this phenomenon is that the actions have all been self-imposed under no external or violent compulsion (by a visible dominator). Free choice is exercised in an information-literate society. The Male Gaze acts as the diffused panopticon, and women, conscious of their own visibility to it **enable** their own subjection.

Given examples such as the above, the free-willing, independent subject who is the foundation of Western consciousness seems to be at-large. Rosalind O'Hanlon (1988: 221) was only half right when talking about the subalterns of the Asia, whom she described as "...the figure of subject-agent (who) is not a universal, but a highly specific one, whose autonomy and self-determination will always render it unobtainable to all but the privileged." The question is how can this be apt only to the Asian subaltern when even Western liberated women of the First World have failed to self-determine the sustainment of their emancipation? Aren't they privileged enough?

If the Panopticon, in its omnipresence is highly successful in regulating domination, can we then think of power **only** as "a force that limits, controls, forbids, masks, withdraws, punishes, excludes, and subjugates"? (DuBois, 1991: 5). Must the feminist movement that one hopes to find in the Third World gain its credential only if and when it can react against prohibitions imposed directly on the subject? Feminism in the west, especially of the post 60's era gave a lot of attention to repressed sexuality as being the condition of women's subjugation and thus the repossession of the sexual body is a fundamental goal of women's liberation. Foucauldian rereading

(verified by the "beauty myth") says that this idea of throwing off prohibitions to mean freedom is an illusion as women are in fact dominated by a certain image of what it is to be a healthy and sexually fulfilled being. Taylor (1986) says the ruse is diabolic when power is always seen in terms of prohibitions,

In going for liberation, we see ourselves as escaping a power understood on the old model. But in fact we live under a power of the new kind, and this we are not escaping; far from it, we are playing its game, we are assuming the shape it has moulded for us. (Taylor, 1986: 79).

The idea of associating prohibitions with the lack of freedom can be seen in the many writings by Western scholars when describing the condition of the non-West Other, such as in studies on women and veiling (Aihwa Ong, 1990). The phenomenon of veiling is seen in a uni-dimensional light, giving little sovereignty to the subjects themselves, and always taken from the standpoint of it being a male privilege rather than that of the female. Does a confined sexuality mean that one is powerless in confronting patriarchy? Could it ever be possible that even though one's sexuality is openly and directly prescribed by males, one is not necessarily disempowered? The reversal of this same question is, why doesn't self-induced sexual liberation, autonomously determined by western women guarantee potency in challenging male domination? In fact, veiling may be seen as having a liberating purpose, or a reappropriation on the part of the wearer of her claim to a new cultural space (Minh-ha, 1988: 73).

Going by the Foucauldian idea, it is probably power possessed in the most overt and transparent form (for example, Dakwah men ¹² over their women) that will see a much swifter and dramatic breakdown, since the imposer of control is less ambivalent and diffused. A Muslim woman who chooses to veil has the transparent and direct knowledge as to who or what she is addressing in that the decision can directly be traced either to God's command, the prophet's decree, husband's wish or to peer persuasion. The power relationship is localised, whereas the omnipresence of the Male gaze in modern

societies is much harder to comprehend and counter. Self-determination among muslims is based on an *a priori* acceptance that all self-constituting decisions must stem from a "higher" source. However, what constitutes this "higher" source will vary for Malaysian women in different subject positions. Independent scholarly Muslim women will rationalise their action upon an *a priori* premise of an accepted truth in the form of an enlightened Islam. Young female factory recruits (of Aihwa Ong's sample), who are by design or culture cutoff from the practice of inquiring, will probably choose to veil due to a conflated influence stemming from peer-pressure, media messages, current popular views on Islam and male expectations. Other women who have less of an opportunity to work outside their houses and even much less access to independent decision-making will probably veil simply upon the command of their husbands, and nothing more.

There have also been more and more Muslim women in this country who have independently chosen to don the veil (in a great fusion of styles and diversity) without having to trace the reason to compulsion from the male-centred entity. This phenomenon, of wearing more fashionable veils, seems to indicate that the old power prescription, or the top-down interpretation of female modesty by men is breaking down. Yet this is not so. Modesty just gets redefined. These women are also subject-agents who want to assert their Islamic identity by choosing to define and express their sexuality through a demonstration of dressing that is **not** in the image of the fulfilled sexual nature of the West. However, in this context, sensuality and modesty are reconstituted in the creation of the new identity. The catalytic symbols of sensuality are not suppressed but actually reversed in this instance, where, the more that is hidden the more alluringly sexed the image becomes. In the first instance there was a great liberating potential in the act of being different when these women defy conventional dress codes. Eventually this too becomes normalized and took on a form which coopted the feminine back under the control of patriarchy -- with a few adjustments and reversals of symbols but essentially the same in substance. They might just be as free and at the same time just as confined as their western sisters; both subjected to an omnipresent power that is diffused and amorphous.

However, this is not to negate the fact that the pre-modern cannot be subjugated by or blended into the postmodern. This does in fact happen. For instance, the wearing of the veil among Malaysian Muslim women exhibits this multi-layered cultural meaning in which the boundaries of pre-modern, modern and postmodern are fused. What started as a pre-modern symbol has been appropriated by some contemporary Muslim women as something that may even symbolise "corporate power", "authority", or "matriarchal presence" imbued with the sense of "moral correctness", "cultural appropriateness" and "eastern gentility". There are two sets of social expectations which these women have fulfilled here -- one required by the demands of the pervasive and unstoppable forces of the modernising environment and the other by the dictates of traditionalism and preservation. The realisation that the pre-modern cannot be allowed to linger while at the same time conscious of the need to be insured against the unappealing consequences of modernity is creatively resolved in a stance which comfortably converges the two. This explains the contradictory image projected by some Muslim women, who are operating as leaders in the corporate sector or public service but also at the same time loudly donning a dress code that is conservatively Islamic. Younger Malay Muslim women have open courtship with their male partners in public (strictly prohibited in the Islamic religion) while garbed in a headscarf, which is a symbol of correct female conduct. Some Muslim women who are public speakers exhort androgynous child-rearing, while they at the same time veil themselves to proclaim and segregate their female identity. A lot of Muslim women cover themselves in public but will have no reservations in wearing revealing sports gear, for instance, among other women in an aerobics class session.

In the modern context, the veil may cover a certain part of the anatomy but does not conceal the wearer from the public gaze. In fact Malaysian Muslim women's presence in the public has not been inhibited; far from it, the new Islamic culture is widening women's scope for exposure. There is now a place for Muslim fashion in most women's magazines,¹³ and there is also Muslim fashion shows, which are not strictly limited to the female audience.¹⁴ The religious movement, having dictated that the Muslim women's attire should be

of a certain appearance can then have no more say as to what further meaning it should take. To reverse the Beauty Myth argument which says that the myth is not about prescribing appearance but behaviour, it could be said that in the Malaysian context, the veil is really a prescription for appearance and not behaviour. Among these women, multiple behavioural expressions will continue to abound, subverting and overthrowing the original notions of propriety.

Indigenous, Banal and Marginal

Some Third World women seek their autonomy by becoming non-participants and excluding themselves from the public political culture of civil society. This would be in tandem with the postmodern perspective of the civil being a myth, "...one of the central conceits of the modern western state in its dealings in this field: that it has been able to realize and to preserve such a realm of neutral freedom, but that obstacles have arisen in the way of all its population reaching it." (O'Hanlon, 1988: 221). Postmodernism seems to put more hope in finding resistances in unconventional recesses; dispersed and not seemingly political; such as evasions from the norms, withdrawal and indifference to legitimating structures. (O' Hanlon, 1988: 223). Furthermore, banality may not be insignificant and withdrawing into the private could indicate defiance of political manipulation (O`Hanlon, 1988: 223). Nevertheless, if this representation is used by an intellectual or an activist upon a dispossessed subject, it will not be unlike the Orientalist syndrome, which puts the Westerner in a "flexible positional superiority" and allows for a "whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative up hand". (Said, 1979: 7).

The emphasis of looking at the margins to understand power can be seen in the context of Malaysian "feminist" practices. If there is any dominance of a particular feminist value, it is the liberal-humanist credo enhanced by the dictates of the modern capitalist state that really describes the rationale behind the movement. Malaysian women have not been formally denied the **equal** opportunity to partake of public life though not equally represented in all areas of the public and civil

domain. Enrolment figures of both sexes in Malaysian formal schooling is equal at all levels although many cultural, and material factors intervene to continue privileging the male and discriminating against the female in this society. Out of this interplay of access and exclusion, women adopt a conventional view that there is nothing to stop a woman from achieving what she wants, provided she is clever enough to tread carefully and not upset the "unchangeable" norms of a gendered society. Aware that there are social and cultural barriers, women's defence mechanism is activated to justify the possibility that if one cannot achieve ambitions the same way that a man does, then one has to be resourceful to know how to "negotiate", "manoeuvre", "bargain", "manipulate", or "manage" the situation for one's benefit.¹⁵ Even the assertion of what is commonly understood to be the essential "femininity" can be successfully used to promote the woman's place in a man's world.¹⁶ The above are "gaming" strategies operating within the rules of the male privileging system. It is not within a woman's might to transgress patriarchal order but the rules are considered acceptable since women may excel and even partake of the benefits and responsibility normally held by males, provided she enters the field with the full knowledge that there would be certain trade-offs. In the previous generation most women had to accept spinsterhood in order to choose career. Today women live with the strains of a double-day and the guilt of imperfect motherhood in exchange for a fulfilling full-time career. The pervasiveness of the discourse of balance today shows that this manoeuvring strategy is being activated strenuously. Is this where the power of today's feminists lies? Many successful women in the east are not embarrassed to suggest that they are thankful to the eastern brand of "patriarchalism" for allowing them the room to excel. They mean to imply that they have an extended family support system, domestic help and sound balancing principles to help them along in their career. Which brings us to the question of whether these institutions are the extensions of, or the replacements for patriarchy?

Some scholars and activists tend to overacknowledge the potential of the "silent" weapons of the weak among women (Couillard, 1990; Hutheesing, 1994). They make the conclusion that it is the female world and the female system of meaning that must be uncovered to assert itself alongside a male preserve. Thus female power is seen as

the obverse side of male power and not necessarily less potent. However, "feminine wiles" are usually reactions employed to disarm the male indifferent-superiority-complex. Power in such reflexive banal acts are thus marginal unresists hoping to unseat the centredness of male power. The concept of the "margin" itself denotes that it is an accomplice to the centre, and always addressing the centre, so much so that without the centre there can be no margins. (Spivak, 1990: 156) The effect of these subterranean and separatist strategies, although powerful in and of themselves, can prevent women from reacting against everyday and generalised sexism. This is because they will be too absorbed in reproducing the separate realm or would be too complacent with the banal. A separatist strategy will not be able to deal with the world outside its own, unless the strategy is capable of undermining and overpowering all other competing strategies. Can, or should we demarcate a boundary separating female power from male supremacy, or the male jargon from female talk (Otome Hutheesing, 1992)? Expressions of "feminism" based on the banal ordering of life with its inherent tendency towards sexual complementarity will definitely be attractive to some sections of the non-western women's movement. But to what extent can they be defended? Certainly not in an environment in which the push towards more material accumulation, individual recognition and personal rights is being globalised.

Conclusion

The overall task of discovering or the unearthing of women's power cannot slip into looking at every banal textuality for indications of power-play, but rather must situate power in its more omnipresent aspects and understand the relationship of men and women this way. In the same instance, the final resistance against a diffused and subterranean power will probably take on a new character, which may not also necessarily depend wholly on the seizure of the civil instrument. Thus the strategy to resist cannot involve "final, privileged, or foundational" mapping (Couzens Hoy, 1986: 139-140). Power is **not** all uni-dimensional, or having a straightforward top-down dynamics, or always possessed and then directed. Thus there

must be a realisation of a need to gauge the efficacy of various strategies for empowering change based on the multiple notions of power.

The contribution that poststructuralist readings can make to our understanding of feminism is its call to look at the other side of the individual rather than on mere collectivities, which do not lead to ends that have been prescribed, (Spivak, 1990: 28). It is also a tool that enables those involved to "denaturalize external claims" (DuBois, 1991: 27) thus allowing other "truths" to emerge. Emanating from all that, at a more pragmatic level, is the more enhanced understanding of the workings of power, as in the interplay of the varied expressions of feminist consciousness in the Third World.

The lesson of poststructuralist analysis can be useful because it gives us insights into the crises that have seemingly befallen the self-constituting, autonomous subject-agent of Western humanist enlightenment. The postmodern condition is not just abstract theorising but is grounded on empirically observable conditions of the west and also societies globally. It would seem that the lesson for Third World feminist practice today, out of the postmodern rhetoric and condition, would be to understand and capture for themselves what Western feminism did not achieve despite victories in personal freedoms and rights. Very simply, while Third World feminist movements should continue to campaign for more, and more specific legal reforms and the realisation of basic human rights and civil liberties, it must also caution itself against the potential emptiness of this collective revolution given that the workings of power and its abuse are highly divergent. Nevertheless, while plural expressions of feminism must be recognised, the task of doing, be it in the act of changing, overcoming or re-appropriating a power base, will ultimately be a political, and an essentialist one.

Notes

- ¹ The term postmodernism was originally used in art; "As opposed to the seriousness of 'high modernism', postmodernism exhibited a new insouciance, a new playfulness and a new eclecticism.." (Kellner, 1988: 239)
- ² Colonialism extended the values of enlightened secularism as the path towards human progress, thus justifying their colonising missions. However, it was also through this path that the relationship of domination was reproduced, even under post-colonial conditions.
- ³ "...the rationalist narratives of the knowing subject, full of a certain sort of benevolence towards others, wanting to welcome those others into his own...understanding of the world, so that they too can be liberated..." (Spivak, 1990: 19)
- ⁴ "In the process ..that such a world is defined, (and) the norm remains the benevolent originator of rationalist philosophy...But the big word is also phallocentrism, so that there is a certain sort of understanding that the hero of this scenario, of this narrative is in fact Western man." (Spivak, 1990: 19).
- ⁵ By taking this example I do not mean to suggest that these group of women represent the only anti-sexist women's position in the country. However, even if the group represent a marginal voice, their standpoint is still worth considering.
- ⁶ Unpublished notes, "A Note on a Book On Islam and Feminism", Applied Socio-Economic Research, Lahore; 1991.
- ⁷ The factions resisting comprise those loyal to the socialist regime, and secular and social democratic supporters.
- ⁸ I reproduce the words which were circulated in a appeals pamphlet; "This year, 1992, in the heart of a multicultural

Moghreb, in the heart of a people whose daughters, wives and mothers fought the colonisers only yesterday, there is an immediate risk that Algerian women may lose their most basic liberties. We therefore call on all women and men willing to join and support us, to take solidarity action and to set up...everywhere you have the freedom to do so". (Action Watch Committee For the Defence of Women's Rights in Algeria and for the Respect of Democratic Liberties, WLUML Pamphlet).

- 9 Habermas believed that the modernity project is an unfinished project which contained unfulfilled emancipatory potential, especially in advancing social rationality, justice and morality (Kellner, 1988: 263-264).
- 10 This is of course selective discrimination, as modern western management ideologies are openly consumed. If feminism can prove that conduct based on sexual equality can affect material accumulation then it might perhaps have a chance of being accepted.
- 11 The Panopticon, as used by Foucault, is said to constitute, "...a generalisable model of a mechanism of power. In its 'ideal form' the architectural construction of a field of visibility, in which the observer remains unseen, creates a relationship of power in which those who are subject to observation and conscious of their visibility conspire to produce their own subjection." (Smart, 1983: 111).
- 12 Strongly conservative Islamic followers who interpret Islamic fundamentals in a way that challenges modern notions of freedom.
- 13 In the August issue of a popular women's magazine *Jelita*, well known for promoting elitist and glamorous lifestyles, a good few pages are devoted to the exhibit of chic and fashionable Muslim outfits. The model is photographed at the premises of the Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute of Islamic Understanding), a

government sponsored research institute.

- 14 Recently students from the International Islamic University of Malaysia staged a fashion show which exhibited Muslim attire for women. The first prize was won by a student who designed a wedding gown, much in the fashion of the western bridal gown but with a headgear that covered the hair. The winner won RM2,000 as prize money and a RM4,000 package to perform the umrah (minor haj). The statement by the designer easily represents the general mood of present day Malay Muslim women; "Designing a bridal gown for a Muslim bride-to-be was quite tough. I've to come up with a design that depicts respect and trendiness at the same time". (*The Sunday Star*, 21 August, 1994).
- 15 Kandiyoti calls this syndrome, "patriarchal bargaining", especially under conditions when no new alternatives for empowerment are developing (Kandiyoti, D, 1988).
- 16 Wanita Umno leaders use their feminine charms to negotiate and win among men (Wazir, 1994: 11)

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