Centrality of Experiences and Third World Women
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Within and Beyond the Binary
I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining what not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definition of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (Anzaldua 1987:81)

Gloria Anzaldua, a lesbian-Latina feminist writer tries to set aside the racist and sexist hierarchies and binaries through her concept of *"mestiza consciousness"* articulated in her famous work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). She recognizes that the dualist thinking and hierarchal binary opposites have fostered dominant discourses that limitedly structure reality. She is eminent for use of the *mestiza*, the name she calls a border dweller who straddles along with many unnatural borders (ideas and ideologies). Within the unnatural borders, there is the constant state of transition, the place of contradictions, she terms as *borderland*. (1987:25). Dwelling in the border, the *mestiza* sways with the state of transitions and inconsistencies where she is "neither one nor another" (1987:41). Through this she develops a consciousness, she terms *"la facultad",* which gives her the capacity to see deeper realities beyond the superficial ideas and ideologies of the unnatural border. The *mestiza* possesses the sensitivity and knows the deeper realities dreadfully present in this world (1987:60). She bestrides with multiple contradictions and has a multifaceted consciousness and transitory identity which gives her the ability to construct her own theoretical space that challenges some appropriation and negation that assigns her as 'the other'.

The *mestiza* consciousness is utilized by Anzaldua to come up with a strategy that is not set on dualities. The concept may provide feminist theorists with a framework to consider identity and subjectivity without regressing to hierarchies and binary oppositions. Although the figure of the *mestiza* was so symbolic of a Mexican migrating/crossing the border to the United States and may seem to be a culturally essentialized identity, the way Anzaldua has developed the *mestiza* can be applied to other contexts and formation of the individual subjectivities beyond the binary. Particularly, it can be applied to the conditions of women, minorities, marginalized and oppressed. It presents a challenge to the feminist framework modeled after the hierarchical binary, such as 'the self and other'. Anzaldua says that the *mestiza* consciousness is a kind of massive uprooting of the limited, dualistic thinking on all levels (1987:80)[1].

The feminist perspective of the self and the other has been the baseline for many studies about sexuality, gender and feminism. Warner, in *Homo-Narcissism and Heterosexuality* (1990), accounts that the interpretation of asymmetrical difference and identities is rooted from the binary and difference of the self and the other. The binary for one, celebrates the antagonizing relations between human beings, man and woman, the unequal power evokes the alienation and pursues "the death of the other"[2]. The binary structures of thought *"generally serve to shape… (things)",* which may develop out of what Lyotard *"regards… as agonistic, or based in conflicting oppositions revolving around the struggle"* (Lyotard 1979, 10-11, 16, word in parenthesis mine). Apart from this, within the binary, identities are bound to limit its forms from only being selves and others, subjects and objects. Boundaries are created between the binary, which may not consider other states of consciousness and identity, in-between or beyond.

In *Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1991), Chandra Mohanty discusses the misappropriate use of the binary and the concept of woman as the other to project an understanding third world women's identities[3]. In what she terms as discursive colonialism, Mohanty criticizes some social science writings that cast an objectifying gaze to third world women as automatic others. In a variety of texts, Mohanty says, the assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality (1991:53) has been applied by western feminists and scholars to third world women. These writings have promoted the binary mode of thought and argue for a universal norm. They have made the West as the subject and western feminists have assigned third world women as the object, the other.

Ethnocentricity is produced when third world structures and situations are judged by western standards. When the west is espoused as the universal norm/subject, and there is an assumption that female subordination is present in all societies. Mohanty says that western women have shifted the burden resulting from the binary of self and other to third world women, by means of constructing the image of third world women as other: underdeveloped, domestic and ignorant (1991:72). At the realm of all this, third world women's identities are produced monolithically, which limits their identities and blurs an understanding of their real situations.

Many postcolonial feminists have reacted to this kind of elucidations of third world women's identities. They have challenged the ethnocentricity prevailing in feminisms and the misappropriated concepts resulting from a hierarchical binary mode. Applying the self and other binary and andocentric model of man as the universal norm, women are defined primarily by their status as objects. It is has been common that many western feminists and scholars would identify third world women as automatic victims, dependent, passive objects, etc, but many postcolonial and third world feminists would argue that this is contrary to real situations. If we are to analyze women from their specific situations and contexts, we may be able to see their struggles and resistances that exhibit power and agency (Mohanty 1991; Narayan 1997).

Gender is also taken as the only aspect to describe women's identities. This suggests woman's identity as female or feminine, formed prior to a woman's engagement with a variety of institutions. Lorde (1984) observes that the women's movements within western feminisms focused on homogeneity of experience and identity of women *because they are women --- gendered beings*. With this, they have ignored women's differences in terms of race, class, age, etc. (1984:116).

Even the term feminism is questioned by many third world women (Mohanty 1991:7). It sometimes fall short of comprehension, and inclusion for they only sketch gender issues, more so, gender issues in terms of middle-class, white, Western women[4]. Johnson-Odim (1991) refused to use the term feminism for she believes that the agenda between First and Third world feminisms is not really common. Walker, in a critique that feminism has only captured limited (gender) struggle, has opted to use *"womanism"* as an alternative. The term includes almost all women and deals better with racial, class and national struggles of all women (Walker 1983). Hurtado (1989) argued that Western feminism has defined gender on the basis of relations between male and female, which can be unfair for women of color for various reasons, i.e., there is a closeness of white women to white men and a social distance of women of color to both. To articulate feminism in gendered terms makes one think that being a woman has nothing to do with race, class, culture, location and history.

Similar to some postcolonial feminists, I construe womanhood and identity as something beyond sexuality and sexual orientation. As we recognize race, class and other aspects of identity, we will find that there are many differences among women and their identities. These differences ensue to various kinds of struggles among women. For one, race is a crucial difference that sets a different kind of struggle between white women and women of color. As Moraga and Anzaldua notes, *"as third world women, we clearly have a different relationship to racism than white women…all of us are born into an environment where racism exists. Racism affects all of our lives…."* (1981: 62). The failure to acknowledge racial differences may highlight similarities among women, but Anzaldua warns that ignoring race differences can create or accentuate other differences such as class. These unacknowledged or unarticulated differences further widen the gap between white and colored (Anzaldúa 1990: xxi). Texts produced by western feminists where race has not been identified or recognized as difference among women, clearly sets aside women of other race or color in their agenda. This exclusion may imply non-recognition and create some forms of oppression. Examples of these texts are Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) and Gornick's and Moran's *Woman in Sexist Society* (1971). These texts assume the universal category of woman and perceive a universal experience for all women. The blindness for the categories of race and ethnicity as parts of one's identity denies the specificity of each woman. This move favors other women while making others inessential. As Spelman in *Inessential*

Woman (1988) argues that this is the paradox at the heart of feminism, any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we have in common undermines any attempt to talk about the differences among us, and this is *othering* other women. Daly for example, in a notorious response to a question about race in Simone de Beauvoir conference in 1979, said that race did not interest her. Daly's appropriation of ethnic women's (Chinese, Indian, and Asian) experience to a gender analysis isolated the cases from race, class and colonialism[5].

Apart from recognizing racial difference, postcolonial feminists assert that third world women must be viewed in terms of their historical, social and political situations. As Mohanty (1991) says, third world women are mostly depicted as victims of male dominance and traditional cultures by western standards, and with this, no attention is paid to their history and difference. The western feminist scholarship uses the 'colonial move' (54) through their hierarchical binary line of thinking, which may in turn, rerun the process of colonialization. Narayan poses a similar critique when Daly (1978) fails to give due account to the social and historical context of the treatment of *sati*. If we analyze third world women as subjects in their own specific contexts, as Mohanty and Narayan argue, we may find that these women may live and act with agency. When the analysis of third world women lacks a contextualization within historical, social and political background, the view of third world women becomes too monolithic.

The key objective of many postcolonial feminists is to make a contextual view of third world women rather than to elucidate them in terms of the rigid structure of the binary. Acknowledgement of differences among women in terms of their race, class, history, location, along with sexuality and gender, must be applied in viewing third world women. With this, postcolonial feminists promote different women's identities and different modes of thinking about women. However, the difference that they promote is not the same as the duality or hierarchical binary, but something that gives way for multiple identities of women and promotes an enriching source of how to understand third world women sincerely.

Although postcolonial feminists have campaigned against the binary of the self and the other by promoting difference in non-oppressive ways, the mechanic of the binary were still utilized by feminists' discourses about race to create the categories of white and black or color. I assert that some of the postcolonial feminists are still accountable for the use of the binary of the self and the other, first and third world, north and south, victims and victimizers, oppressors and oppressed, center and margin, etc. There have already been explicit critiques of this the use of the binary within discourses about race (Spillers 1989; Cho 1993). Feminist discourses about women which accommodate the races according to the binary of white and color/black are too idealized and have repeated the very rigid structure of the binary of the self and other. The racialized ideologies were initially used by postcolonial feminists to build bridges for solidarity among women of color (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981)[6]. Even though it is utilized as a basis for alliance, the binary however may structure the woman into a dead end. The binary, whether used in modes of consciousness, identity or race, neither includes nor accommodate women who are in contradictory subject positions. The limitations of the binary are blind to many other stories that cannot be fully contained within it. It cannot fully capture fluid and nomadic subjects who are always in the state of transition.

Apart from empirical contest, the binary creates the production of texts of western feminists and postcolonial feminists in which the one remains at the center, in the position of the privileged class; in opposition to the margin, resulting from the very pattern of phallocentricity and ethnocentricity. This further agitates the struggle. Moreover, in postcolonial feminist critiques against white-centeredness in feminisms, they have also constructed the white or western as monolithic and deny the conflict between racial differences of white women (differences between Irish, British, American, etc. women). The binary applied to race remains ethnocentric as it facilitates division among races and may not acknowledge that the process of *othering* may be a worldwide phenomenon. For example, oppression of a poor white woman against a rich white man or woman is also a process of *othering*. Apart from these, the binary as applied to race may mislead people that there are purities of the white and black or colored races.

Mohanty proposes that a better theoretical model involves intersectionality. We must construct the category of women in *"a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another"* (1991: 65). Such an analysis is politically focused and highly context-specific, mindful of links between women and groups of women without falling into hasty generalizations or false universalisms, a space that acknowledges the contradictions as well as the commonalities among women. She sees this possible through *women's experiences.*

Mohanty's Centrality of Experience

Lived experiences are the rich sources of insights about identities. A better understanding of third world women can be incremented and broadened through the use of their personal *'experiences contextualized within their politics of location'.* This will be more appropriate for characterizations of third world women as it includes or takes into account the complexities of identities and contradictory subject positions they take that go/move beyond the binaries.

With this view, emphasis should be placed on the context of taking women's experiences as sources of any knowledge claims about them and their identities. As highlighted by Mohanty, experiences must not be understood in terms of a universal standard but it must be comprehended according to the ways in which women place meanings on these experiences within its historical and social contexts. This is how Mohanty infuses concept of *the politics of location.* It supposes that a woman has no *apriori* essence, form of consciousness and identity. Instead, a woman is understood in the context of her engagement with her situation; her experiences. Thus, a sense of authority is placed on experiences as sources of knowledge claims about women and their identities. Although not explicit, Mohanty formulates a kind of standpoint theory when she uses experiences as a vehicle to understand women and a site where their real identities can be developed and explained.

Experiences have these natures of plasticity. With this, I mean, it can be ossified according to the structure and situation of every individual and their specific situations regardless of sexual orientation, race and class. The meanings laid into experiences are also subject to how each particular woman formulates her experience.

The multiplicity and variety of third world women's experiences can also challenge the binary of the self and the other, which was used by some western feminists to mechanically posit the third world women as the other. The assumption is that if there are experiences which fall outside, in between or beyond the two categorical terms, the very meaning of the self and the other and the concept of third world women as the other will be defied. The study, through the proposed employment of experiences as a way of viewing third world women, can open avenues for plural yet lithe feminisms, which may be thoroughly inclusive of women's plights regardless of sexual orientation, race and class.

Experience and the Politics of Location

Through the theorizing of experience, Mohanty suggests that historicizing experiences and locating power and agency derived from these, are necessary alternative to formulations of universality of gendered oppression and struggle (1995: 69). Since the universality of gender oppression is problematic for it speculates that there is a universal category of women and ignores race and class, feminists can point to use of experience for a more effective feminist theory and politics.

Mohanty cautions that although experiences are effective sources of any knowledge claims about women and their identities, these experiences must be analyzed according to its specific context, within the politics of women's locations.

Experiences are rich sources of understanding women, women's identities and commonality of struggles for women. Mohanty recalls her experiences within the politics of her location. She defines the politics of location as the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide ground for political definition and self-definition (1995: 68). *"Coming*

from India, she (Mohanty) was racially Indian (raced, local). When she taught at a high school in Nigeria, she was a foreigner (not necessarily raced --- white or black). But when she did her research in London, she was black…[7]. *As a professor at an American University, she was considered an Asian woman (raced, foreigner, other), and was also a resident alien (other), with an Indian Passport. But now she is a US Citizen, whose racialization has shifted negatively after 9/11 attacks"* (2003: 190; words in parentheses mine). Mohanty's experiences and identities pursue shifting labels dependent on location. As she says, the meanings we place on experiences and how we consider them as sources of identities are reliant on location and specific context (2003:135). Out of this engagement of experience with location, we find differences in women, differences in their identities. Mohanty criticizes the narratives of women's experiences which fail to examine and accommodate the politics of location and cultural processes that engender those experiences and identities. She refuses homogenizing notions of women's identities and infusion of standards in experiences. She argues against Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), that although it utilizes women's experiences, Morgan assumes women are cross-culturally singular, homogenous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals and similar experiences (1995: 72)[8]. Any understanding of women's experience based on the narrow conception of gender would be incapable of fully addressing the effects of other economic and cultural processes (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xvi) that women differently experience.

Although an understanding of women's experience intertwined with the politics of location is necessary, Mohanty warns that one must not stop there. Feminism should involve shifting unit of analysis from local, regional, and national culture to relations and processes across cultures. Grounding analyses in particular, local knowledge is necessary but we also need to understand the local in relation to the larger, cross-national processes (1997: xix). In this case, local experience must not just be narrated as such but these experiences must be situated in relation to broader historical, cultural, and global phenomena. When experience-rooted writings of identity challenge monolithic notions of identity, discursive representation and colonization, and moves toward a contextualization from local to global perspectives, these, according to Mohanty, embrace the shift of social positions strategically (2003:14) and form a basis of understanding, alliance and solidarity among women.

Mohanty also suggests that what constitutes women of color or third world women and makes them form alliances is not necessarily color or racial identifications but their common context of struggle deduced from common experiences. This is the structure that determines their potential political alliances (2003: 49). The status of experience has been a central concern for feminist discourse and Mohanty says that it is on this basis, the basis of common and shared experience, that feminists form political persuasions (1995: 70). She quotes de Lauretis that "*the relation of experience to discourse… is an issue of the definition of feminism"* (1986: 5, quoted in Mohanty 1995: 70). De Lauretis defines *"feminism as political stance, is not merely confined to the theory of sexual politics but to the politics of everyday life, (experiences)…which later enters the public sphere…displaces aesthetic hierarchies and generic categories… and thus establishes production of reference and meaning"* (1986: 10), across all women regardless of sexual orientation, race or class. And by taking experience as in-depth source of identity formation, there could be a possibility that Third World women, immigrant women or the *mestiza*, as Anzaldua refers, will be finally free and be whatever "kinds" of women they can be.

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