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**International feminist solidarity.  
A possible response to the postcolonial critique of global  
sisterhood?**

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In this article I explore how feminist postcolonial theories can help us to illuminate both the challenges and possibilities of instigating and maintaining a project founded on the notion of international feminist solidarity. Starting from their critique of the notion of global sisterhood, I investigate how different authors, including Yuval Davis, Brah, Ahmed, and Mohanty, envisage the possibility of creating a common form of feminist commitment based on solidarity and dialogue as well as on the acknowledgement of differences among women. The article examines how the theory of intersectionality was used to this aim. Within the framework of difference I devote specific attention to how the issue of cultural difference is dealt with by feminist postcolonial authors. Finally I argue that in any project based on the concept of international feminist solidarity, there is a need to address the issue of whiteness, as the unacknowledged ethnicity and a racial and ethnic dimension of privilege.

**Introduction**

The increasing presence of migrant women in Western countries poses a series of challenges to established feminist theories and practices. Migrant women force us to realise that gender cannot be the only ground on which to analyse women's oppression. An intersectional analysis that relates gender to other dimensions such as race, ethnicity, class, migrant/refugee status, as well as sexuality, age, and ability is necessary. This necessity stems from the feminist

postcolonial critique of the notion of global sisterhood, a notion that those authors regarded as premised only on the experiences of White, Western, middle class women. Following on from this, some feminist postcolonial authors, (such as Yuval Davis (2006a, 2006b), Brah (1996), Mohanty (2003), Ahmed (2000), to name a few), identified alternative forms of feminist international commitment based on a concept of solidarity and dialogue.

In this article I will explore some of their most significant contributions in light of the following questions: “How can feminist postcolonial theories help to illuminate both the challenges and possibilities of instigating and maintaining a project founded on the notion of international feminist solidarity? How can feminist postcolonial thinkers guide us in developing a common agenda while simultaneously acknowledging differences primarily of gender, race and ethnicity, but also differences of class, sexuality, ability and age?”

### **International feminist solidarity**

On the basis of their critique of the concept of global sisterhood, some feminist postcolonial authors argue for the building of a project based on some forms of international feminist solidarity. Brah (1996, p.89) argued that “it is now widely accepted that ‘woman’ is not a unitary category. The question remains whether it can be a unifying category”. In response to that question, this article presents some of the most significant attempts to define alternative models of feminist solidarity among women positioned differently along various axes of differentiation.

Yuval Davis (2006a, p.206) identifies in “transversal politics”, (which is defined as “a democratic practice of alliances across boundaries of difference”) an alternative to identity politics. The central thesis is that the basis for a common action is to be found “in common values”, rather than “in common

positioning or identifications” (Yuval Davis 2010, p.278). From an epistemological point of view, by referring to Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Yuval Davis (2010, p.278) underlines how

*“the recognition that from each positioning the world is seen differently and that, thus, any knowledge based on just one positioning is ‘unfinished’ (as opposed to ‘invalid’). Therefore, the only way to approach ‘the truth’ is through dialogue between people of different positionings, the wider the better.”*

Yuval Davis (2006c, p.21) grounds this concept on the basis of her experience in transnational networks working against religious fundamentalism in Great Britain and Israel/Palestine. Furthermore she was inspired by a group of Italian feminists who used it to describe the practice of ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’ that they applied in meetings bringing together Palestinian and Israeli women. This methodology was based on the idea that each participant would bring, on the one hand, her rooting as regards her own membership and identity, but on the other they would try to shift, in order to imagine themselves in the position of the other (Yuval Davis 1997).

Yuval Davis (1997, p.92) also states that transversal politics should be used across the spectrum of politics, from grassroots organizations to state and international level. However she also specifies that transversal politics are only possible when “the different participants share compatible value systems”. (Yuval Davis 2006c, p.284)

Similarly Brah opposes a concept of politics of identity in favour of one of politics of identification. She states that

*“these processes of political identification - of the formation of ‘communities in struggle’ - do not erase the diversity of human experience; rather, they enable us to*

*appreciate the 'particular' within the 'universal', and the 'universal' within the 'particular'". (Brah 1996, p.93)*

However, these processes are deemed possible only if they are premised on the recognition of the “interconnectedness as well as the specificity of each oppression.” (Brah 1996, p.93) At a practical level this is translated into the necessity to link local work with broader national and global movements.

Ahmed (2000, p.180) also stresses the importance of the formation of alliances, however her focus is not on common values, but on the work that we need to do “in order to get closer to others, without simply repeating the appropriation of 'them' as labour or a sign of difference”. The author looks at the ways in which Western feminism responded to the critique of the notion of global sisterhood and acknowledges that there is now a much greater awareness of the question of who speaks *and* for whom. However, this has led in some cases to a reaction of silence that Ahmed reads as a form of cultural relativism and a denial of responsibility. On the contrary, she stresses how Western and Third World women cannot avoid an encounter as they are already in relation in the framework of a globalised economy where Third World women provide the cheap labour that is at the basis of the capitalist system. The question, therefore, is not if the encounter has to take place but how it takes place. Ahmed (2000, p.171) then asks a crucial question for any project aiming at bringing together women from First and Third Worlds, namely how it is possible for women to encounter each other in a different way, since their possible encounters are already influenced by the different positions they held, on a geopolitical level, in relation to labour and consumption.

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Finally, Ahmed (2000) argues in favour of a politics of closer encounters that is based on dialogue and in opposition to either universalism or cultural relativism, a politics which is necessary precisely because of our differences.

Similar to Ahmed, Mohanty (2003, p.224) stresses the importance of focusing on the position of women in the global market and she advocates for a “non colonizing feminist solidarity across borders”. When revisiting her initial essay, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984), Mohanty (2003, p.224) specified that she did not advocate for the impossibilities of building alliances between First World and Third World women, but rather for the construction of a “non colonizing feminist solidarity across borders”. She also argued that vague notions of global sisterhood should be replaced by a feminist notion of solidarity grounded on an anti-capitalist critique. More specifically she referred to international feminism without borders founded on three concepts: decolonization, anti-capitalist critique and a politics of solidarity. Mohanty (2003, p.2) stressed the distinction between “without borders” and “border-less” as she underlined that it is important to acknowledge borders of race, class, sexuality, and ability in order to be able to cross them.

Other feminist postcolonial scholars place themselves in a more critical position with respect to the possibility of building some forms of feminist international commitment based on a concept of solidarity. However their reflection can still be helpful as I detail below.

For instance, the notion of strategic essentialism elaborated by Spivak (1988) can be a useful element in this context. Even though Spivak<sup>1</sup> later criticized the use that has been made of this term, what she meant to emphasise is that for strategic reasons it should be possible to use collective categories, such as “women”, “Third World women”, and “workers”, despite knowing that these categories do not correspond to “real” collective identities. She underlines her belief that there is a difference between theory and strategy, so what cannot be correct from a theoretical point of view, can be useful in strategic terms. Strategic essentialism describes a situation in which a temporary solidarity is made in order to act and mobilize around a specific aim. This concept can be very helpful in relation to forms of women's activism and to build alliances between women coming from different parts of the world. If it is clear that the purpose for which the category “women” is mobilised is a strategic one with regard to a given social change, the use of this category may prove to be less contentious.

In contrast to those who argue in favour of a necessary encounter among First and Third world women, Ang (1995) advocates for a politics of partiality rather than one of inclusion. The latter aims at obtaining a universal position that recognises feminism as a “political home for all women” (Ang 1995, p.71), while the former has a clear awareness of its limitations because it recognises that “feminism can never ever be an encompassing political home for all women” (Ang 1995, p.72); for some of them other political projects may be more important. Ang (1995) argues that if mainstream feminism has acknowledged the critiques of the notion of global sisterhood, it still acts in order to accommodate difference. In doing so she underlines how there is a desire to reconcile differences within feminism in order to maintain the notion

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<sup>1</sup> In the Boundary 2 Interview

that feminism can be a shared project for all women. These conclusions appear to be antagonistic to any form of common political engagement. Yet it is necessary to recognise the full legitimacy of such a position. As recalled by Lugones and Spelman (1983), it should come as no surprise that previously excluded women would just want to build their own theories and practices in an effort to preserve their difference from what they perceive as attempts of appropriation and commodification of their specific experience of oppression.

A position that is neither centred on dialogue between First and Third World women, nor aims at the construction of a separate theory from Third World women is argued for by Sandoval, who suggests that feminist hegemonic theory can be overcome only through a theory and method of oppositional consciousness based on the experience of Third World women (Sandoval, 1991). Sandoval (2000, p.104) further develops her concept of a methodology of the oppressed as one developed by subjugated people belonging to minorities living in a majority culture. She notes that

*“the skills they might develop, if they survive, have included the ability to self consciously navigate modes of dominant consciousness, learning to interrupt the ‘turnstile’ that alternately reveals history, as against the dominant forms of masquerade that history can take, ‘focusing on each separately’, applying a ‘formal method of reading’, cynically but also un-cynically, and not only with the hope of surviving, but with a desire to create a better world.”*

The final goal of such a methodology is described as the democratization of power through active social engagement. The main point of interest in Sandoval’s methodology is the fact that she reverses the hegemonic framework in which white, Western people are positioned at the centre. Such a methodology is premised on the idea that oppressed people, precisely because



of their position, are those who are best placed to develop a methodology that can oppose the dominant capitalist and patriarchal society. Secondly, even if Sandoval is conscious that not all oppressed people will be in a position to develop such a methodology, it appears that her claim is in opposition to Spivak's (1993; 1996) conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. Finally, even if Sandoval argues for the elaboration of a methodology from the point of view of the oppressed, she does not aim at creating a separate Third World women's movement, but a general methodology of liberation that interrogates the concept of power.

### **Acknowledging difference**

In any project of international feminist solidarity it is paramount to investigate how the concepts of difference and cultural difference are conceptualised and dealt with. One of the most common strategies devised to acknowledge difference has been that of intersectionality. The concept was first devised to stress the fact that black women's lives were not only shaped by their gender, but also their race and class as well as their sexualities. Crenshaw (1991), who first coined the term, demonstrated that the subordination experienced by Black women exceeded the simple sum of their race and sex. Brah and Phoenix (2004, p.77) however identify a fundamental anticipation of the concept of intersectionality in the famous speech of Sojourner Truth, "*Ain't I a woman*". Since then the notion of intersectionality has been largely used both at theoretical and policy level to indicate the various axes of differentiation that shape people's lives and contribute to social inequality. However the concrete application of this concept has given rise to a number of difficulties. For instance Yuval Davis (2006a, p.205) argues that the idea of intersectionality has sometimes been used on the basis of an "additive model of oppression". On the contrary, Yuval Davis (2006a, p.205) asserts that

*“the point is to analyse the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities.”*

Relating to this Brah (1996) asks a number of key questions for any project that aims at bringing together women positioned along various axes of differentiation.

*“How does difference designate the ‘other’? Who defines difference? What are the presumed norms from which a group is marked as being different? What is the nature of attributes that are claimed as characterizing a group as different? How are the boundaries of difference constituted, maintained or dissipated? How is difference interiorized in the landscapes of the psyche? How are various groups represented in different discourses on difference? Does difference differentiate laterally or hierarchically?”* (Brah 1996, p.114)

Another central issue when analysing difference, concerns the issue of the possible appropriation or commodification of difference. For instance Ahmed (2000, p.168) emphasises how the unequal power relationships are hidden behind what she calls “commodity fetishism” in the international division of labour as a way of appropriating women’s difference, for instance, in the buying of certain products. However, Ahmed (2000, p.169) highlights how, in reality, that encounter is “highly mediated and dependent on forms of concealment”. Similarly hooks<sup>2</sup> (1992) provides a number of examples of how black culture can be appropriated and commodified by white culture, for instance in music, performances and movies. hooks's main point is that some elements of black culture are taken and inserted into a given performance, show or cultural habit without acknowledging the oppression suffered by the black

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks is the pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins and is intentionally uncapitalized.

population. Ang (1995) also expresses a very radical position on the issue of difference. She states that even if mainstream feminism has acknowledged the critiques of the notion of global sisterhood, it still acts in order to accommodate difference. On the contrary, she criticises the attitude that focuses on resolving differences in the a priori assumption that good communication can be established. She argues that instead of looking away from those moments in which communication seem to fail special attention should be devoted to them. Even though Ang does not believe in the possibility of forms of common political engagement bringing together women from First and Third world, her warnings about the concealment of difference within feminism should be taken into consideration.

In the framework of difference it is fundamental to devote a specific analysis on the notion of cultural difference as this is sometimes considered as a new way to mask discourses of racism. As noted by Rattansi (2007), since the concept of race has been denied any scientific validity, few theoretical and / or political positions, openly assume a racist view. However the concept of race seems to have been replaced by that of cultural difference. At the same time Rattansi (2007, p.104) reflects on the fact that in these new forms of racism, cultural traits are often used in an ‘essentialist’ way, which tends to naturalise them. These traits then come to be addressed in a similar way to biological characteristics, “by implying that they are more or less immutable”.

This is why Brah (1996, p.91) distinguishes the concept of cultural difference from that of cultural diversity by stating that the latter

*“may be affirmed and celebrated while bearing in mind that the notion of ‘cultural difference’ is vulnerable to appropriation within political tendencies marking essentialist and impervious boundaries between groups.”*

Cultural difference in contexts that see the presence of ethnic minorities raises the issue of multiculturalism, namely the politics of recognising difference in opposition to assimilationist policies. While arguing against the assimilationist model, many feminist postcolonial scholars have also addressed the shortcomings of multiculturalism. Yuval Davis (1997, p.119) is particularly straightforward in this critique when she argues that the feminist version of multiculturalism has developed as a form of identity politics that

*“tend not only to homogenize and naturalize social categories and groupings, but also to deny shifting boundaries of identities and internal power differences and conflicts of interest.”*

At the same time multiculturalism does not challenge the Western hegemonic culture; it can have the effect of being divisive because it tends to underline the cultural differences between ethnic minorities, instead of the common experience they have of racism, as well as social and economic exploitation. (Bourne and Sivanandan 1980; Mullard 1984 as cited in Yuval Davis, Anthias and Kofman 2006, p.523).

Yuval Davis concludes that multiculturalism may have harmful consequences for women due to the fact that often cultural difference is defined on the basis of specific gender norms based on women's control (Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989 as cited in Yuval Davis, Anthias and Kofman, 2006, p.523).

For these reasons I would argue that a project founded on the concept of international feminist solidarity is best placed within an intercultural framework. By the term “intercultural” I refer to a concept as well as a political project that involves a search for dialogue among cultures leading to interaction and understanding as well as to possible reciprocal influences and changes.

Cultures are thus seen as dynamic, and internally diverse. I refer here to a social constructivist understanding of cultures that criticizes the idea of a clear correspondence between cultures and groups of population while stressing internal differences as well as power relations inside a given culture (Benhabib 2002).

### **Whiteness as the unacknowledged ethnicity**

Finally the notion of whiteness emerges as a critical issue for a project based on international feminist solidarity precisely because as, underlined by Knowles (2004, p.174) “an analysis of race that has nothing to say about whiteness is incomplete: missing half the problem.” Such a position is based on the acknowledgement that being white equates to experience of an ethnic and “racial” positioning in the world. On the contrary whiteness has been and is usually seen as a neutral category that does not require specific consideration or analysis. Ethnicity and race are categories that are normally used to describe the “Others”, namely the non Westerners and non White. Frankenberg (1993b) was one of the first scholars researching this issue in her pioneer work based on the interviews of 30 White women. Here, she articulated the concept of whiteness as follows

*“First whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second it is a “standpoint”, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, at society. Third “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed”* (Frankenberg 1993b, p.1).

Ang (1995) referring to Frankenberg, also states that

*“white privilege does not have to do necessarily with overt or explicit forms of racism, but with a much more normalised and insidious set of assumptions which disremember the structural advantage of being white, and which generalise specifically white cultural*

*practices and ways of seeing and being in the world as normal .... The extent to which this white self-exnomination permeates mainstream feminism should not be underestimated.” (Ang, 1995, p.61)*

The concept of whiteness as privilege is endorsed also by McIntosh (1990) who - differently to the second wave feminists - comes to question the notion of whiteness precisely because of her feminist concerns and teaching in a Women's Studies programme. Her reasoning is based on the comparison between male privilege and White privilege. Through her analysis of unacknowledged male privilege and on the basis that hierarchies are interlocking, she comes to the conclusion that whiteness functions as a similar phenomenon.

*“I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.” (McIntosh 1990, p.31)*

The analysis presented above raises the issue of how it is possible from a white person's point of view – and for the purpose of our project in particular, from a white woman's point of view - to endorse a critical understanding of the concept of whiteness. Frankenberg (1993a) warns that it is not possible to renounce race privilege as our lives are embedded in a political and social system that is founded on this. As a white feminist she invites us to work on three levels: a re-examination of personal history, a theoretical transformation of feminism and a practical, political engagement (Frankenberg, 1993b).

## Conclusions

As I have detailed in the previous paragraphs, a project of international feminist solidarity stems from the necessity to acknowledge the critique of the notion of global sisterhood as a concept that was not inclusive of the experience of women from the South of the world. Feminist engagement may be described in different ways. From “transversal politics” based on the practice of “rooting and shifting”, (Yuval Davis 1997; 2006c), to “processes of political identification” as opposed to politics of identity (Brah 1996, p.93), from politics of “closer encounters” based on dialogue (Ahmed 2000, p.180) to “non colonizing feminist solidarity across borders”. (Mohanty 2003, p.224)

A premise for all those projects is the acknowledgement of difference. The notion of difference should be analysed in all its dimensions, especially as regards the issue of who defines it and on which grounds and if “difference differentiates laterally or hierarchically” (Brah 1996, p.115). Such a project should also guard against a possible appropriation and commodification of difference as explained in particular by hooks (1992) and Ahmed (2000), as well as against the tendency to conceal differences as shown by Ang (1995). Furthermore, as concluded by Brah (1996), a project of international feminist solidarity should refuse both ethnocentric universalism and cultural relativism. It should also evaluate critically the effects that multicultural policies have had on women, as shown by Yuval Davis (1997), and opt for an intercultural framework providing for a more dialogic and dynamic understanding of cultures. Finally such a project must critically analyse the category of whiteness as a racial and ethnic dimension of privilege and not as a neutral category and the norm.



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