

**“Critically Assess the Implications of Postcolonial Theory for our  
Understanding of Contemporary Feminist Politics.”**

**By Sebastian Wigdel-Bowcott**

**School of Politics and International Studies  
University of Leeds**

**Module: PIED 3610  
Feminist Challenges to Political Theory**

**Module Leader: Dr. Alexa Athelstan**

## **“Critically Assess the Implications of Postcolonial Theory for our Understanding of Contemporary Feminist Politics.”**

By Sebastian Wigdel-Bowcott

Mainstream feminism’s long history of white-Eurocentrism has created the need for a deep decolonisation of feminist politics, activism, scholarship and historicisation. This essay argues that the contributions of postcolonial theory allow for a more comprehensive and decolonised understanding of the contemporary political landscape, in that it allows for a move away from mainstream understandings of neoliberalism as informed by Western-centric history. In its place comes an understanding that makes explicit and centres the inherent relationship between colonialism and global capitalism, and which brings to the fore the gendered nature of such a power structure. This is not to suggest that neoliberalism is the sole defining characteristic of the contemporary political landscape, but it is very significant given the emergence of a neoliberal feminism that co-opts women’s rights to serve an antifeminist agenda (as in the War on Terror for example, which will be explored). In ‘When was the post-colonial? Thinking at the limit’, Stuart Hall concludes with an appeal for more solid analyses of the interplay between colonialism and global capital (1996, p.257). I agree with Hall on this generally, but with this essay I aim to show that one needs only to look towards postcolonial feminisms for significant work in this direction, several of which had already been written before Hall’s canonical essay.

The argument presented here is twofold in that by establishing a decolonised understanding of the contemporary landscape, the bar by which contemporary feminisms are held to account can be refined. Groups like FEMEN can be discredited for the universalistic claims they make that are reliant on privileged, liberal, Western-centric values and beliefs, and in this case the Islamophobic constructions of Muslim women that arise as a consequence.

Importantly, the nuanced analysis that postcolonial theory provides also allows for the critique of feminisms that are popularly considered ‘progressive’. Sunera Thobani’s critique of the shared imperial tendencies found in the works of Judith Butler, Zillah Eisenstein, and Phyllis Chesler is a comprehensive illustration of this (Thobani, 2007). From this, I conclude that postcolonial feminist theory is essential to contemporary feminist politics because it provides an unparalleled understanding of the workings and scale of colonial legacies such as institutional whiteness. Building on Chandra Mohanty’s call for “decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and solidarity” (Mohanty, 1988, p.3) will then allow for a feminist politics that is effective in its anti-neoliberalism because the decolonised discursive space that opens up allows for a global application of a postcolonial intersectionality.

Doing service to the complexity and multiplicity of postcolonial theory is not the work of this essay, but it is something I am conscious of in having to be selective with the thinkers that I choose to engage with. In an attempt to retain this openness, my understanding of the ‘postcolonial’ owes much to Hall’s definition of it as a ‘conceptual space’ (Hall, 1996, p.244), which relates to his belief in the need for everything to be understood discursively. My understanding of discourse is in the Foucauldian sense that Edward Said utilised to pioneer a postcolonial discourse analysis in ‘Orientalism’ (2003 [1978], p.3). ‘Discourse’ refers to any “ensemble of meaning” that is unified by regular relationships between different elements (Sayyid, 2003, p.45). As an example, the regularity between feminist activism, scholarship, art, and literature can all be seen to collectively form a very broad ‘feminist discourse’. The important point to take away from this is that all knowledge is created discursively, all social relations are made meaningful by discourses that create representations of people and of the world they inhabit. Postcolonial discourse analysis thus becomes about deconstructing harmful representations of ‘the Other’ that have been presented as non-political and incontestable ‘true’

knowledge. Centring discourse is productive because it links the very different writings of Mohanty (1988), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Christina Scharff (2011), Thobani (2007), and Leila Abu-Lughod (2002), which are all drawn upon to facilitate analysis in this essay.

The marginalisation and erasure of non-white women in mainstream feminism has been well documented (Thompson, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). This exclusion has been the case within feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988; Spelman, 1988; Spivak, 1988), as well as in popular historicisations of women's movements (Baxandall, 2001; Gluck, 1998). The recently released 'Suffragette' film is consistent with this history, where the omission of women of colour occurs despite their critical involvement in the movement (Carroll, 2015). It is for these reasons that postcolonial theory and its ability to offer "an alternative narrative" (Hall, 1996, p.249) appeals in attempts to comprehend the implications of such large scale "politics of erasure" (Carroll, 2015). The scope of this alternative narrative is vast though, and the dissipation of binaries that it demands, combined with its complexity, calls into question the entire historiography within which the epistemology of the West is grounded (Hall, 1996, p.250). The ability to refer to a cohesive 'West' in this essay is made possible by the emergence of a distinct Western identity as colonial interactions began between Europe and the non-European world (ibid., p.252). This identity is tied to racial thinking in that it emerged to distinguish from 'non-Westernness' (ibid.), and its use in this essay does not take away from 'the West' as understood in all its diversity.

Postcolonial theory contests the 'universal truth' status that Western readings of history hold, and in doing so exposes the cultural-specificity of such knowledge. This is particularly significant to contemporary feminist politics, given that understandings of neoliberalism are

reliant on a “grand historiographical narrative” that is informed by liberal historiography, Weberian historical sociology, and Western Marxism (Hall, 1996, p.250). That the universalism of such knowledge is taken for granted centralises the white subject, and arguably explains why many Marxist and anti-capitalist movements have reproduced much of the same structures of exclusion and oppression that they intended to deconstruct (Coleman & Bassi, 2011; Vogel, 1983; Hartmann, 1979).

The development of neoliberalism should not be understood as an inevitability, but as the product of particular global-historical processes. A dehistoricised account of neoliberalism allows its emergence to be studied in isolation from a history of Western interaction with the rest of the world that is characterised by colonialism and empire. This is the case in ‘The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)’, where the reliance on “nineteenth-century European” Marxist class categories is defended in response to postcolonial criticism (Gibson-Graham, 2006, xix-xx). This is not to suggest that Western modes of thought cannot be used to defeat Eurocentrism, but that the utilisation of categories and concepts should be combined with the knowledge that they have emerged from “ethnically closed and ‘centred’ original histories” (Hall, 1996, p.250).

The value of a postcolonial outlook is that it facilitates a deconstruction of Eurocentrism within feminism. This allows for a shift towards building a decolonised feminist epistemology that stresses the need to understand neoliberalism and the globalisation of capital as inherently intertwined with colonialism; towards a framework of “connected histories”, as Bhabra puts it (2007, p.146). For our understanding of neoliberalism, postcolonial theory can illuminate the cultural powers of neoliberalism in regard to identity construction. The relevance of re-

contextualising neoliberalism in relation to colonialism, for this essay, is that neoliberalism's centring of the 'individual' encourages the self-construction of a white Western self in binary opposition to an inferior non-white, non-Western 'Other' (Scharff 2011; Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988). The importance of being hyper cautious to a 'neoliberal feminism' that claims to speak on behalf of all women cannot be stressed enough in light of this. What can be established with the above is that neoliberalism is explicitly tied to institutional whiteness. This relationship is essential to consider when the work of Abu-Lughod (2002) and Thobani (2007) is engaged with later in the essay.

### **Contemporary Feminist Politics**

I will proceed now with analysis that draws on specific examples of contemporary feminist politics to illustrate how some of the things I have been discussing take form. Specifically, the appearance of a 'white saviour complex' within Western feminism has created an assumed need for "saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, p.296), as exemplified by FEMEN. After this I will turn to Thobani's critiques of Butler, Eisenstein, and Chesler, to discuss the imperialist tendency to centre and universalise the white subject and its experiences.

FEMEN's 'Topless Jihad' campaign was conducted as a series of coordinated half-nude protests across European cities in April 2013. These protests were intended as a statement of solidarity with Amina Sboui, a Tunisian woman (and FEMEN member) who had been met with death threats and calls for prosecution after posting pictures of herself topless, with the slogan "My body belongs to me, it is not the source of anyone's honour" painted on her torso (Al Jazeera, 2013). But instead of providing a platform for Sboui, or make any attempt to engage with Muslim-Tunisian feminist organisations, FEMEN chose to reproduce the popular

narrative that situates Islam in direct opposition to Western liberal ideals by addressing Islam and the ‘Arab World’ with their slogans (Jewish News One, 2013).

Parallels emerge in FEMEN’s actions to much of the ‘salvation’ rhetoric that Abu-Lughod exposes as such a problematic component of the ‘War on Terror’ discourse (Abu-Lughod, 2002). FEMEN’s reductive, homogenous understanding of Islam constructs it as a system of oppression akin to patriarchy; one that strips Muslim women of their voice, seemingly justifying the need for white women to speak on behalf of them. This can be understood to be part of a wider discourse that has political functions in the War on Terror era, as Leila Abu-Lughod testifies to in her account of the way in which Afghani women’s rights have been co-opted and mobilised to serve a pro-war US agenda (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.784). The process at play in both of these examples is what Mohanty has described as white feminism’s tendency to “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World” (1988, p.19). A singular, homogenous representation of Muslim women arises from this rejection of historicity.

Importantly, the homogenous constructions that emerge as a result of addressing ‘Islamic attitudes to women’ make the idea of a ‘Muslim feminist’ an impossible contradiction, and silences the diverse plurality of Muslim feminisms that exist. The idea that being nude in public universally applies as a signifier of liberation also seriously misunderstands the concerns of Muslim women regardless of where they are in the world. This highlights the need, especially in Western feminism, to be aware of and respect the cultural specificity (and therefore plurality) of languages of freedom and rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p.788). The same applies to understanding patriarchy and other systems of oppression. Events following

FEMEN's 'Topless Jihad' are important to note: not only did it spark a transnational online response from feminist Muslim women, but Sboui also chose to leave the group because of its Islamophobia (France 24, 2013).

Essentialist claims that present Islam as the cause of oppression, combined with an assumption about the universality of Western patriarchy, erases the potential to make important distinctions such as those between Islamicate patriarchy and the patriarchal elements of Islam. The former refers to the patriarchal structure of society found in majority Muslim countries, whilst the other relates to the male hegemony over religious interpretation. Correspondingly, this display of cultural imperialism and racial supremacy demonstrates a complete failure to address the ways in which neoliberalism, racism, secularism, a history of imperialism, and many other cultural-societal factors dictate the various forms that patriarchy takes in the West.

Previously I referred to institutional whiteness as a product of lasting colonial structures; here I would like to elaborate on that with reference to the critiques of Butler, Chesler, and Eisenstein offered by Thobani in 'White Wars – Western Feminism and the 'War on Terror'' (2007). In many ways this is a similar article to Abu-Lughod's in that it maps a 'War on Terror' discourse, but instead of analysing the neoliberal co-optation of women's rights, the focus is on the ways in which the War on Terror is discussed in Western feminist scholarship. Thobani provides a postcolonial theorisation of whiteness as a "social identity" that emerged in tandem with the emergence of colonialism (Thobani, 2007, p.171). Whiteness is a fundamental component of the distinct 'Western' identity that was outlined previously; key to this is appreciating that a belief in racial superiority will have harmful long-term effects

when it is integral to an identity that emerged in a context of such unequal power relations (ibid.).

The particular poignancy of Thobani's analysis for the purposes of this essay is the way in which all three scholars demonstrate a centring of the white subject in their work, regardless of their support or condemnation for the War on Terror itself. I am not so much concerned with Thobani's critique of Chesler and her enthusiastic support for the War on Terror. The binary that is evoked to pit a violent Islam against a peaceful world order, as created by Western liberal democracy, is of the same ilk as the world view that can be interpreted from the activism of FEMEN. For this section of the essay, Thobani's deconstruction of Butler and Eisenstein as they condemn Western violence and the War on Terror proves far more interesting for further analysis.

In much of the same way that attempts have been made to whitewash the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign with the 'All Lives Matter' slogan in the US (Bry, 2015), Butler attempts to establish a framework that can encapsulate the whole of humanity, on the grounds of 'loss' and 'struggle' being a shared emotion that all humans experience (Butler, 2004, cited in Thobani, 2007, p.176). Thobani's criticism comes not so much from the possibility of such a concept, but more from Butler's attempts to establish this through an essentialist account of 'loss', in that it universalises the white experience (Thobani, 2007, p.176). It diminishes the historical and cultural factors that would shape such an experience (Thobani, 2007, p.177); the imperial encounter and its after-effects for example, perhaps most prominently the War on Terror itself, which is the very topic of Butler's inquiry.

Thobani's critique of Eisenstein underscores the importance of being alert to the possibility of colonial tendencies even in postcolonial critiques of colonialism, whiteness, and the West. This is relevant to Hall's premise of there being a need to decolonise the way 'colonialism' is presented as a descriptive category in the first place (Hall, 1996, pp.253-254). Thobani takes issue with Eisenstein because she "elevates gender above other social relations" to build a paradigm of shared gender oppression that transcends the construction of the world into West and non-West (Thobani, 2007, p.179). Eisenstein does account for the differences in the gender oppression that Western and non-Western women experience, but the problem with prioritising gender in this case is that it relegates race to a subordinate position in analysis. Like Butler, this is a move which is consistent with the exclusionary tendencies of white feminism. This has highly problematic implications in that it re-inscribes "a white gendered subject as innocent of, and removed from, its complicities with empire-building" (Thobani, 2007, p.180).

As Thobani illustrates, what can be seen in Chesler, Butler and Eisenstein's engagements with the War on Terror, as scathing in its anti-war critique as the latter two are, is a continuous misapplication of the Western experience as universal. That this critique applies to such polar arguments (for and against the War on Terror) points towards the institutionalisation of whiteness in Western feminist scholarship. That this can be described on an institutional level as opposed to attributing it to the biased standpoints of individual scholars is supported by the actions of the journal that published Thobani's article. In 'Embodying Diversity', Sara Ahmed criticises *Feminist Theory* for publishing alongside Thobani's article an incendiary response to Thobani from Chesler (Ahmed, 2009, p.50). I cite this because it serves to further illustrate the institutional whiteness at hand, in that it demonstrates very clearly that even in a "special issue of a feminist journal on whiteness" (ibid.), the boundaries for discussion were always pre-determined from the position of a white subject.

What can be seen with the example of FEMEN is a damaging homogenous construction of Muslim women that arises as a result of the false presumption that Western beliefs and values have universal applicability. Differently with Thobani's article is the self-construction of whiteness in engagements with the War on Terror, thus linking to Scharff's article that details the role that neoliberalism plays as white selfhood is constructed in opposition to representations of oppressed Muslim women (Scharff, 2011, p.120).

Butler, Eisenstein and Chesler are all consistent with white mainstream feminism's exclusionary history, and such a lack of self-reflection makes true intersectional thought redundant. The ability to locate oneself within global power structures is essential, and this is exactly what postcolonial theory is able to facilitate. Achieving a mode of thought that is intersectional on a global level requires what Mohanty describes as "self-reflexive collective practice" (1988, p.8). This implies being mindful of institutional whiteness in all its manifestations. Attention should be given to its entanglement with neoliberalism and other ideologies that rely on exploitation, and particularly how these interact to inform the construction of a white, Western self.

## **Conclusion**

Postcolonial theory facilitates a re-evaluation of the current socio-political-historical landscape that contemporary feminist politics has to navigate. Neoliberalism is re-contextualised in this landscape. Global relations in the past four decades have been characterised by Western attempts to universalise neoliberalism, and this is consistent with a history of imperial exploitation in white-Western interactions with the non-white, non-Western world. Meanwhile

neoliberal feminism fills the political space that feminism operates in by co-opting a women's rights discourse, exhausting it of its usefulness.

Postcolonial theory also provides tools for critiquing contemporary feminist politics. Its discursive focus allows for a deconstruction of cultural essentialism and harmful representations, as has been demonstrated with reference to Amina Sboui and FEMEN. At the same time, it encourages an attentiveness to the constitutive element of discourse, in that all interpretations of the world rely on constructed representations that have often been created in a context of unequal power dynamics. This essay has shown that this knowledge can be utilised to make the important recognition that neoliberal feminism is not the only feminism that has imperial tendencies. Lastly, postcolonial theory provides a sense of what an 'ideal' feminism could be, in that to be fully intersectional, one must be able to locate oneself within institutionalised global power structures that have a long history of domination and oppression.

## Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, L. 2002. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist*. 104(3), pp.783-790.

Ahmed, S. 2009. Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 12(1), pp.41-52.

Al Jazeera English – The Stream, 2013. Topless Tunisian protester at the centre of controversy [online]. Available from: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201303252145-0022635> [Accessed October 18, 2015].

Baxandall, R. 2001. Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists. *Feminist Studies*. 27(1), p.225.

Bhabra, G. 2007. *Rethinking modernity*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.

Bry, D. 2015. 'All lives matter' is and always was racist – the weekend's campaign rally proved it | Dave Bry. *The Guardian* [online]. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/23/all-lives-matter-racist-trump-weekend-campaign-rally-proved-it> [Accessed January 4, 2016].

Carroll, R. 2015. Suffragette's publicity campaign and the politics of erasure. *The Guardian* [online]. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/05/suffragette-film-publicity-campaign-erasure-feminism> [Accessed January 3, 2016].

Coleman, L. and Bassi, S. 2011. Deconstructing Militant Manhood. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 13(2), pp.204-224.

Crenshaw, K. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*. 43(6), p.1241.

France 24, 2013. Africa - Tunisia's Amina quits 'Islamophobic' Femen [online]. Available from: <http://www.france24.com/en/20130820-jailed-tunisia-activist-amina-leaves-islamophobic-femen-organisation> [Accessed January 4, 2016].

Gibson-Graham, J. 2006. *The end of capitalism (as we knew it)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gluck, S. 1998. Whose Feminism, Whose History? Reflections on Excavating the History of (the) U.S. Women's Movement(s) *In*: N. Naples, ed. *Community Activism and feminist politics*. New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. 1996. When was the post-colonial? Thinking at the limit *In*: I. Chambers and L. Curti, ed. *The post-colonial question*. London: Routledge, pp. 242-259.

Hartmann, H. 1979. The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union. *Capital & Class*. 3(2), pp.1-33.

hooks, b. 1981. *Ain't I a woman*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Jewish News One, 2013. *Topless Jihad backlash: Muslim women launch racist protest against Femen campaign* [online]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hevp3Fidf3U> [Accessed October 18, 2015].

Mohanty, C. 1988. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*. (30), p.61-88.

Said, E. 2003 [originally published 1978]. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Sayyid, S. 2003. *A fundamental fear*. London: Zed Books.

Scharff, C. 2011. Disarticulating feminism: Individualization, neoliberalism and the othering of 'Muslim women'. *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 18(2), pp.119-134.

Spelman, E. 1988. *Inessential woman*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

Spivak, G. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, ed. *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, pp.271-313.

Thobani, S. 2007. White wars: Western feminisms and the 'War on Terror'. *Feminist Theory*. 8(2), pp.169-185.

Thompson, B. 2002. Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism. *Feminist Studies*. 28(2), p.336.

Vogel, L. 1983. *Marxism and the oppression of women*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.