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“Who? What?”: An uninducted view of *Towards a New Psychology of Women from post-Apartheid South Africa*

Jean Baker Miller? *Towards a New Psychology of Women?* Who? What? These were my first thoughts when asked to contribute to this special edition. A quick catalogue search of our library revealed that both editions are available, and a quick Google Scholar search revealed that the book has been cited an extraordinary number of times.

I had three reactions to these discoveries. The first was one of shame, which had me thinking, 'Clearly there has been something missing in my education or, worse, my self-directed reading. How on earth could I, as a self-proclaimed feminist academic who has been in the field for over a decade, have missed this seminal book? And how am I ever going to be able to admit to this?' Following shortly on this I felt justificatory anger. 'In feeling this shame', I thought, 'am I not buying into a form of academic imperialism, an imperialism that assumes that those of us living in "Third World" contexts should be up-to-date with "First World" theory? Is there any specific reason that I, having lived and worked my entire life in South Africa, should have read a book written thirty years ago about people on a completely different continent? Would North American psychologists feel similarly obliged to have read a text written thirty years ago about Africans?' And finally there was rationalisation –

an attempt to balance my first two reactions and allow me to engage with the project. 'Perhaps', I thought, 'my lack of knowledge of the book and my location within the post-colonial, post-apartheid context of South Africa will give me leverage on the book that would have been absent had I been inducted into the book earlier in my career'. Thus, in reading the book I had no reverence or otherwise for it or its project. I read it as an outsider, through the lenses of my engagement with post-structuralist and post-colonial theory (Macleod, 2006; Macleod and Bhatia, in press; Macleod and Durrheim, 2002).

And in this reading I find much to be criticised, and little to be praised. In the following I outline my concerns over the manner in which Miller excludes through inclusion, her narrow model of the self which leads to a narrow politics based on the heterosexual relationship with the nuclear family as backdrop, and her naivety around the temporary nature of some inequalities. Despite some usefulness in her analysis of 'permanent inequality', her privileging of the axis of gender leaves the complexities of race, class, and location completely untheorised.

The criticisms cited above are similar to the over-arching difficulties pointed out by current feminist theorists regarding 'second wave' feminism. While several theoretical solutions to these difficulties have been propagated, I argue for radical plural feminisms that analyse gender within the patchwork of global patriarchies and that take transversal relations of commonality around oppressive practices rather than categories of people as their starting point.

Despite my ignorance of her work, Miller's influence must surely be recognised if only from the evidence of many citations. Nevertheless, I conclude this piece by stating that I shall not be rushing to recommend this 'seminal' book to my students. This has partially to do with what I perceive to be the limitations of current Western theorising into which Miller's work has fed, and partially to do with the fact that I believe that the seminal basis of African feminisms lies elsewhere.

Normativity: exclusion through inclusion

Towards a New Psychology of Women (TPNW) promises a new psychology of 'women'. On the cover of the second edition, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* is cited as acclaiming the book as 'nothing short of revolutionary' as it 'set out to recognize, re-define and understand the day-to-day experience of women'. But when we take a closer look at these 'women' we discover that they are in fact 'white', (for the most part) middle-class, women living in heterosexual relationships in a liberal democracy.

This kind of exclusionary inclusion, in which the use of the generic term 'woman' disguises the normative assumptions made about the race, class, sexual orientation and location of women, replicates the phallogentrism evidenced in the normalising masculinist terms 'mankind' or 'Man'. By now, of course, these kinds of critiques of 'white' Western feminism by African American writers (e.g. Collins, 1999) postcolonial feminists (e.g. Mohanty, 1991), African feminists (e.g. Ogunidipe-Leslie, 1994; Mangena, 2003), and queer theorists (e.g. Jackson, 1999) are well known.

Indeed, these kinds of criticism have been made from within Western feminism. As Stacey (1997) points out, the feminism of the 70s (or what has been called 'second wave' feminism) of which Miller forms a part has been characterised as follows:

[it] was naively universalistic, it was anti-sex, it ignored differences among women ..., it embraced experience unproblematically, it was humourless, it was anti-pleasure, it was homophobic and/or anti-lesbian, it was bourgeois, it was humanist, it was essentialist and it tried to speak for all women (p. 59).

Miller, thus, spoke, in a sense, from the *zeitgeist* of her time and location.

It appears, however, that Miller was not blind to these kinds of difficulties, at least not in the second edition. In this edition, she acknowledges the exclusionary focus of the book. She adds a section at the end of the final chapter entitled *Conflict among women today*, presumably in reaction to criticisms of the first edition. In it she acknowledges conflicts 'over issues of sexual preference, over class and race' (1986: 133), and that white women 'benefit at the expense of minority, working-class, and poor women' (1986: 137), and that heterosexual women have been among the oppressors of lesbian women. However, these sections are clearly add-on (I was able to locate them with ease), and bring a certain incongruency to the book as these issues have not been infused into the analysis – to do so would have required a complete re-write.

But even in the foreword to the second edition, in which Miller is clearly attempting to be more careful with respect to 'race', class and sexual orientation, the inclusion/exclusion normativity around 'women' continues. In the second paragraph of the foreword to the second edition, Miller talks of the letters that she received from

women in response to the first edition. The first was written by a ‘woman who read the book while she was in prison’ (1986: ix). The second was from a ‘black professional woman’ (1986: ix). The first person, apart from her (non)exotic location within a prison, is the taken-for-granted ‘woman’ with no descriptors attached concerning her ‘race’ or class. The second person, however, requires definition beyond the category of ‘woman’. Her race and class define her personhood in ways that are not extended to the first woman. Instead the first woman’s race and class remain invisible – the norm against which the second woman is etched.

Later in this foreword, Miller states that ‘women have been socially defined as unequal, similar to other people who have been designated second class on the bases of class, race, and religion’ (Miller, 1986: xxii). This kind of inclusionary/exclusionary othering is repeated throughout the book. Women of these ‘other people’ are, on one level, included in the category ‘women’, but on another, more fundamental level, they are excluded because they are ‘other people’.

Perhaps this has, at least partially, to do with Miller’s foregrounding of gender as the primary axis of ‘difference’. In the first chapter, she states, ‘At the level of humanity in general, we have seen massive problems around a great variety of differences. But the most basic difference is the one between women and men’ (Miller, 1976/1986, p. 3). The privileging of a gender axis of difference is what has galled many African feminists about ‘Western’ feminism, as this fails to understand the multiplicity of the lives of women who live in Africa – lives in which women have to contend on a daily basis with the effects of racism, ethnicism, (neo)colonialism, heteronormativity, and globalisation, all within a context of poverty, child malnutrition, HIV/Aids, and poor

infrastructural, health, educational and welfare support. Boris (2007), for example, argues that we should 'unprivilege' gender within a gender perspective in Africa.

Certainly in the context of South Africa, privileging gender above all other axes of difference would be met with scepticism at best. In the year in which the first edition of *TNPW* was published, 1976, the Soweto uprising, one of the most significant events in our history of liberation from the shackles of Apartheid, took place. The mid-1980s, during which the second edition of *TNPW* was brought out, South Africans experienced some of the worst oppressions of Apartheid, with detention without trial and states of emergency being common events. Not surprisingly, thus, feminist work in South Africa is, for the most part, finely attuned to the multiplicity of gender relations in South Africa. Scholars steer away from homogenising women into a single category. Rather the network of patriarchies and the matrix of practices and discourses based on race, class, geographical location, age, ability, ethnicity, language and sexual orientation that oppress women in shifting and complex ways are elucidated. The edited collection by Shefer, Boonzaier and Kiguwa (2006) provides a good example of this.

What is acknowledged in this kind of approach is the fact that women may oppress women (and men may oppress men) around axes of race, class, sexual orientation, age, and ability. This potential is remarkably denied by Miller who states 'Women do not come from a background of membership in a group that believed that it needed subordinates' (1986: 116). This is clearly a problematic statement in the context of colonial and post-colonial relations of power, but it should equally be so in the USA with its history of slavery and racial discrimination.

Data sources and the model of the self

Miller's sources of data stem from her psychiatric practice with clients. The case studies that she provides paint a clear picture of the theoretical positions that she is elucidating. However, it never strikes her to question the narrow locatedness of these women. I cannot speak for the United States although I suspect that similar patterns emerge there. In South Africa, psychotherapy appeals to a certain narrow band of women – usually 'white' and mostly middle class. While this pattern has partially to do with the lack of state funded psychological services, a large part of it has to do with health seeking behaviours that draw on a completely different cosmologies and understandings of the person to that underpinning psychotherapy. Although exact numbers are hard to estimate, for a large portion of the South African population, 'traditional' healers (in the form of *sangomas* and herbalists) or faith healers are the first port of call (Kale, 1995).

The women who form the basis of Miller's case studies have been inducted into the psy-complex through a range of cultural, economic and social mechanisms. These are women who take the emotional labour required to fulfil the tenets of the liberal individual seriously. The ways in which they seek to deal with their distress is infused with psychologised technologies of the self that require 'the elaboration of certain techniques for the conduct of one's relation with oneself, for example requiring one to relate to oneself epistemologically (know yourself), despotically (master yourself) or in other ways (care for yourself)' (Rose, 1996: 35).

With these women as her sources of data, Miller's essentialises and homogenises women (the 'subordinate group') and men (the 'dominant group'). She suggests women have fundamental 'needs' that are not fulfilled through their traditional roles of service to men and children. There is an internal, true state of being, an authentic self that is being denied through their positioning as the primary care-givers to men and children, and as primary care-takers of the home. For example, she states. 'A woman cannot use her own life activity to build an image of herself based on an authentic reflection of what she actually is and does' (1986: 54), and 'It often takes strenuous exploration, but usually it turns out that there are deeply felt needs that are not being met at all' (1986: 93). Thus the self is separated from the activities within which the person engages. In the depths, there lurks the true being, the real needs of the individual that, with some labour, can be brought to the surface and for which some struggle is necessary.

Miller disputes the narrowness of her sources of data. She asserts that she has not dealt ... with women who are particularly advanced in their sense of who they are and what they want ... Part of the reasons for doing so ... is the hope of demonstrating the *need* for authenticity and creativity do not belong only to the advanced, the educated, or the elite. These forces are played out in different forms for women in differing circumstances, but they are necessities for all of us (1986: 13).

The jump from a narrowly located group of women, described by Miller as not 'advanced' in their sense of self, to women in undefined differing circumstances seems quite remarkable. The assertion of this generalisation (from the women she describes to all women) allows for the prescription of authenticity and creativity (both

of which are notions based on the liberal, autonomous and essentialised individual) as 'necessities for all of us'.

Contrary to Miller's universalising tendencies noted above, the fragmentation between women based on a range of social axes has been the topic of much recent feminist debate. Indeed, there has been so much discussion of this that some have argued that the debate has resulted in the total displacement of the category women and therefore the impossibility of feminist political action (see Mouffe's (1995) discussion of this). The question thus arises as to how to avoid the pitfalls of both an over-universalisation, as evidenced in Miller's statements above, and a relativism that results in the complete displacement of the category 'woman'.

Elsewhere (Macleod, 2006) I have argued for radical plural feminisms based on post-colonial and poststructural theory. In this, unitary notions of gender identity are replaced with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity (Allen and Baber, 1992). Instead of women being seen as a single oppressed class across space and time, these kinds of foreclosed identities are refused. Feminist politics becomes, thus, a matter of alliances across identified transversal relations of commonality. For example, common oppressive practices that centre around reproduction are identified, but with cognisance being taken of how these oppressive practices may be taken up and experienced in different ways.

These transversal relations of commonality should not, however, be a matter of pronouncement (as Miller does above), but rather should be carefully considered, argued and researched in order to avoid the potential for the neo-colonialism that

many 'Third World' gender activists complain about. Mohanty (1999) provides an excellent example of this kind of work. She studies women across three divergent settings – women lacemakers in India, women in the electronics industry in the United States, and the working lives of black and minority women inside and outside the home in Britain. She illustrates how ideologies of domesticity, femininity and race form a common basis for the construction of these women's identities as workers being secondary to their familial and domestic roles. While these ideologies are taken up in different ways (the lacemaker's work is essentially invisible, the women in the electronics industry's work is temporary and black and minority women's work is an extension of familial roles and loyalties), they are predicated on transnational gendered and racialised processes of exploitation.

Politics based on the heterosexual couple living in the nuclear family

Miller's is a valorising project. In her own words,

[M]ale-led society [has] delegated to women not humanity's 'lowest needs' but its 'highest necessities' – that is, the intense, emotionally connected cooperation and creativity necessary for human life and growth. ... In many ways women have 'filled in' these essentials all along. Precisely because they have done so, women have developed the foundations of extremely valuable psychological qualities, which we are only beginning to understand ...

[W]omen's psychological characteristics are closer to certain psychological essentials and are, therefore, both sources of strength and the bases of a more advanced form of living (1986: 26/27). ‘

As [women] initiate the changes required to meet their own needs they will create the stimulus for a thoroughgoing overhaul of the entire society (1986: 57).

We shall leave aside the possible implication that oppression is good for you, and instead focus on the liberatory project that Miller suggests on the basis of this utopian vision (women's strengths leading to a more advanced form of living). Miller admits, in passing, that there are 'obstacles in reality' (1986: 36), that rearranging job and domestic schedules for men and women would 'require a major change in our institutions and work places' (p. 63), and that 'the very ways we find to conceptualize experience are in large measure given to us the culture in which we learn' (1986: 112). Despite these brief acknowledgements, her focus remains on what amounts to an internalised struggle with little theoretical or practical connection being made to the structural constraints that she outlines. – 'women's major difficulty lies more in admitting the strengths they already have and in allowing themselves to use their resources' (1986: 36), and 'women have not yet fully applied this highly developed faculty to exploring and knowing *themselves*' (1986: 39). Thus liberation is premised on women's engagement with technologies of self. In order to liberate themselves and assist in creating a 'more advanced form of living', they must engage in intense internal, rather than external political, struggle.

Most of the women's struggles described by Miller occur in the context of a heterosexual relationship, with the background assumption of the nuclear family. Indeed, the politics she advocates, although not simple, seems to be contained within the parameters of heteronormativity and relies quite heavily on personal and

individual struggle in the realm of heterosexual relations. Much of it centres on women recognising and acting upon their 'needs'. The latter will lead to struggle that will come at a cost. For example, Miller states that 'if women assume that their own needs have equal validity and proceed to explore and state them more openly, they will be seen as creating conflict and must bear the psychological burden of rejecting men's images of "true womanhood"' (1986: 17).

I do not wish to undermine the importance of these sorts of struggles or to suggest that this kind of micro-politics has no place in a post-colonialist venture. However, this is a limited project. In contexts where battles between heterosexual partners and individual struggles form part of a landscape strewn with complex grids of oppression (e.g. lack of access to health resources such as antiretrovirals, high maternal mortality rates, differential and high rates of unemployment and poverty, endemic violence against women), multiple points and modes of intervention and struggle are needed. Furthermore, as pointed out by African feminists, in the context of ongoing racism and class differentials, the 'family' and heterosexual relations take on different meanings to the ones elucidated by Miller. In these contexts, the family becomes a point of solidarity, a bulwark against the ravages of many and varied practices of racial and class-based discrimination – men and women are frequently united in their struggles (Geisler, 2004).

'Temporary' inequality

Miller makes a distinction early in her book between temporary inequality (e.g. between parents and children, teacher and student, therapist and clients) and

permanent inequality which is based on social ascriptions. This distinction, while heuristic, needs to be examined for its assumption that temporary inequality is relatively benign and the implication that temporary inequality cannot be used to cement more permanent and insidious inequality. Examples around (neo)colonialism will illustrate my point.

Miller says of temporary inequality, 'The lesser, the child, is to be given to, by the person who presumably has more to give. Although the lesser party often also gives much to the superior, these relationships are *based in service* to the lesser party. That it their *raison d'être*' (Miller, 1986: 4). Compare this to statements made by Charton, a French colonialist in a book entitled *African learn to be French* published in 1930. He writes: 'Africa is not capable of evolving a fully formed intellectual culture of her own'. He concludes that France may assist by 'holding out a helping hand to the indigenous culture, which though more simple, is yet closer to life' and that 'school is a focus for all the influences at work for the uplift of native life' (Charton, cited in White, 1996: 15).

This kind of rhetoric in which colonialist powers were positioned as assisting in the development of primitive societies in Africa was relatively pervasive. An element of temporary inequality in the noble cause of uplifting Africa was implied but of course never implemented until the 'natives' themselves resisted. While colonialism, in its gross form, is a thing of the past, similar dynamics operate in the post-colonial era, with (neo)colonialism operating through such things as structural adjustment programmes that are imposed on 'developing countries' by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (cf. Sparr, 1994).

Conclusion

And so, in the light of my initial reactions and after reading the book, what do I think? In the end, I have to conclude that, given my location and the material with which I work, my intellectual life as a feminist has not been greatly dented by not having read Miller until some months ago. Perhaps, I have to concede, the reason that I have been blissfully unaware of her and her influential book has to do exactly with its lack of relevance to the specificities with which South African feminist psychologists grapple.

From the enormous number of times that Miller has been cited it must be conceded that, even with the limitations of her work that surely have been recognised within Western feminism, her work has stimulated much thought and provided the basis of further feminist endeavour. While Stacey (1997) takes issue with the narrative of feminist history that presents it as a history of progress, my concern here has to do with the continued difficulties that Western feminism poses for those of us living and working in Africa. In a previous paper, I argued that current theorising in Western feminisms (especially those with a post-structuralist bent), while containing the potential for appropriation by African feminisms, are insufficient to the task of illuminating gender issues in Africa. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, feminism rose in very different socio-historical circumstances in Africa to those in Europe and America. Current feminisms have emerged chiefly out of women's engagement in national liberation struggles, although African feminists have asserted that African women's resistance and activism against asymmetrical gender power

relations pre-dates colonisation (Guy-Sheftall, 2003). Secondly, all too frequently the former colonies or 'Third World' act as the suppressed absent trace to the preoccupations of the gender-race-class relations of the 'First World'. Roth (2003) asserts that this has been equally true for US-based black feminisms. Kurian (2001) asserts that the division of the history of feminism into 'waves' attests to the domination of Western theorising as these divisions centre around American and European events and personalities. Thirdly, where 'Third World' women do appear in the theorising of Euro-American scholars, they are frequently homogenized into a single category (cf. Mohanty, 1991), or have been excavated as a resource for 'Western' theory (Lal, 1999). Lastly, the social realities of Africa's history of racialised political repression and oppression, struggle politics, exile and return, and current issues around HIV/AIDS, land rights disputes, developmentalism (in the socio-economic sense), continental militarization and political instability together with refugee-ism, global capitalism, poverty, and neo-colonialism (in addition to the challenges of heterosexuality, racism, class struggle, and domestic violence) imply an added complexity of feminist theorising and activism concerning the history and current circumstances of gender relations in African contexts.

Thus, I have to admit that, having now read the book, I do not feel that it is a 'must read' classic for African students. Even if read (as it should be) as a historical document that provides the impetus or background for further, more refined work, I find it, together with much current theorising in Western feminism, strangely irrelevant to the concerns of women in post-Apartheid South Africa. This does not imply that there should be no dialogue between African and Western scholars. Rather it is about acknowledging that feminism in Africa is not a Western import (Adeleye-

Fayemi, 2004) and that the intellectual roots of feminisms (even if that name is not explicitly used) lies elsewhere.

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