

# Conspectus Borealis

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Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 9

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10-27-2019

## Literature Review: The Question of Universal Feminism

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### Recommended Citation

Ureel, Isabelle (2019) "Literature Review: The Question of Universal Feminism," *Conspectus Borealis*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: [https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus\\_borealis/vol6/iss1/9](https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol6/iss1/9)

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For millennia, women have been fighting for freedom, equality, and personhood, even going so far as to sacrifice their lives to secure a better future for the next generation. Today, many women throughout the world take for granted hard-won rights such as the ability to vote, to own and not be property, to get an education, and many more. However, there is still a long way to go. Even now, there are scholars and laypeople who argue that feminism is no longer or never was needed despite how violence against and oppression of women persist around the world, even in the most “advanced” nations. The dominant form of feminism is of Western origin, with roots in democratic values and Euro-American cultural norms. Some applications of this school of feminism have been critiqued as colonialist, transphobic, ethnocentric, and racist. Western feminism is frequently seen as the universal form of feminism, applicable to all cultures, while ignoring the need for a relativist and inclusive balance. As our world becomes more connected, can feminism overcome the predominant ethnocentric and Euro-American centric views to become a universal ideology? By increasing intercultural understanding and advocacy, feminism and feminist movements can become more inclusive and generate greater positive impacts on both individuals and communities.

Western feminism has brought significant achievements, but those achievements have not benefited women universally. In response to this, marginalized groups have adopted transnational feminism. In an article entitled “The Postsocialist ‘Missing Other’ of Transnational Feminism?” anthropologists Madina Tlostanova, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, and Redi Koobak recount their experiences and identities as non-Western feminists and the conflict between postcolonial and postsocialist feminist ideologies. One author states that “her positionality is often read as similar to the West but not similar enough, while also registering as different but somehow *not different enough*” (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 81). Postcolonial feminism has arisen

from theorists in previously colonized nations while postsocialist theory grew from Eastern European countries after years of Nazi and/or Soviet occupation. Both colonization and occupation entail the oppression of different peoples, and the authors declare that postsocialist and postcolonial feminisms “manifest different reactions to the same phenomenon of coloniality” (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 83). Where these theories diverge and conflict is the focus on race and association with Western feminism. Here the authors cite theorist Jennifer Suchland and her concept of “feminist homogenous empty time” which they explain as the “assumed temporality of global women’s movements” (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 82). Postcolonial feminists agree with Suchland’s criticism of the concept of feminist homogeneous empty time as problematic due to erasure of non-mainstream feminisms and the apparent ranking of feminist progress, but it persists in postsocialist thinking “because of these countries’ desired unity with ‘Western’ Europe, even if they remain marginal to it” (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 82). The alignment with being white and Western on the part of postsocialist feminists has created a rift with postcolonial feminists who have valid critiques of Western feminism.

Despite this conflict, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak argue that transnational feminism has the potential to become a “radical, decolonizing” force able to tackle the legacies of Western capitalism, colonialism, and Eastern European postsocialism (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 84-85). Their solution is as complex as the issue their article addresses. Tlostanova et al. call for a methodological shift away from colonialist and Eurocentric thought through theories such as existentialism, rationalism, and relativism:

Transnational inclusive methodology should take into account the close interrelation between being, existence and agency; the principle of relational and experiential rationality; and the building of knowledge, not outside human experience and not by

presenting the problem outside the context, but through a never-ending process of learning, unlearning and relearning, humbly listening to others and entering their worlds with a loving (Lugones, 2003, p. 96) rather than agonistic perception (Tlostanova et al., 2019, p. 85).

The founding principles of understanding, acceptance, and support that underlie transnational feminism can and should be applied to other schools of feminist thought including secular feminism, which is exclusionary. Sindre Bangstad, in her article “Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism after Virtue,” shares similar critiques of Western feminism as Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak while supporting core feminist ideals in contrast with theorist Saba Mahmood. In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood, a postcolonialist and post-structuralist, argues against secular feminism in an ethnographic account of the lives of Muslim women engaged in a piety movement in Egypt. Bangstad agrees that critiques of secular feminism are necessary, in that a “problem for secular feminism – as both an analytical and prescriptive frame of thinking – has been its apparent inability to conceptualize female agency and freedom in any terms other than resistance or subordination to patriarchal societal norms” (Bangstad, 2011, p. 29). This feeds into anti-Muslim sentiment especially in Western nations. For example, secular feminism can come across as hypocritical when fighting for women to be able to wear the clothing they choose and be safe from violence, while also fighting against religious clothing such as the hijab or niqab. It is true that no woman should be forced to wear clothing that they are uncomfortable with or find to be oppressive, but nor should women be forced to give up clothing they chose to wear for any reason such as religious expression, comfort or convenience, or self-expression.

This intolerance and interference on the part of Western secular feminists is called out by Mahmood, but Bangstad criticizes Mahmood for her lack of contextualization, and points out that there is religious intolerance, persecution, and oppression in Islam, too. Mahmood's ethnography also focused on a specific group of Muslim women – well-off, Salafi-oriented Muslim women in Cairo – so their belief and participation in the piety movement cannot be generalized to all Muslim women. Bangstad argues that the benefits this specific group may receive from the movement may not benefit all equally, as “The practices they are engaged in also contributes towards the reproduction of certain forms of gendered (patriarchal, social) power relationships in new forms, and toward the crafting of new social and political hegemonies” (Bangstad, 2011, p. 33). How does the preservation of traditions justify the institutionalization of multiple forms of inequality and even oppression? This seems to be fairly similar to the exclusionary tendencies that plague “white women's” feminism, which Mahmood critiques. Bangstad offers this thought in contrast: “For if feminism is to mean anything at all, it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion that women's entitlement to rights and dignity regardless of religious and ethnic affiliation must be central to its minimal and core definition” (Bangstad, 2011, p. 42). This leans into a universalist rather than relativist view, with Bangstad offering a unifying feminist ideal.

The concern of ethnic exclusion also plagues Indigenous feminist movements. In Andrea Smith's “Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change,” she examines the intersection of Native American identity, sovereignty, and feminism. While there are gendered issues being faced by Native American women, there is a resistance against the term ‘feminist’ due to colonial and ethnocentric connotations. “Native women activists, except those that are ‘assimilated,’ do not consider themselves to be feminist” (Jaimes, 1990 as cited by Smith, 2005,

p. 117). This stems from the intersection of oppression Native women experience, first as Native individuals and then also as female individuals. The anti- or non- feminist activists believe that seeking civil rights and protections undermines the authority of Native nations and acknowledges the sovereignty of the United States over Native American affairs, and by extension culture and even existence. However, Smith argues that because colonial and gender violence are so closely intertwined, it is impossible to ignore one issue while tackling the other. Native women have endured forced sterilization by colonial forces, domestic violence by their communities, and sexism and misogyny in everyday life by both (Smith, 2005, p. 122). The glass ceiling is as real for them as it is for non-Native women. Smith cites the election of Wilma Mankiller and the fears that a female leader would somehow cripple or delegitimize the Cherokee Nation to show that misogyny, no matter whether its roots are in colonial trespasses or Native culture, is present today and needs to be rectified. “If we maintain these patriarchal gender systems in place, we are then unable to decolonize and fully assert our sovereignty” (Smith, 2005, p. 124). Thus, feminism is clearly required to solve these issues, but Western feminism is ill-suited to the task.

Indigenous groups outside of the Americas also struggle with balancing the need to preserve cultural traditions while also protecting women’s rights. During her time in Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific, feminist anthropologist Jean Mitchell observed this conflict between women’s rights advocacy and local cultural practice in the form of *kastom*. Her research in “Engaging Feminist Anthropology in Vanuatu: Local Knowledge and Universal Claims” lays out the structural violence against women in Vanuatu culture. *Kastom* and *kastomary* practices primarily celebrate and promote male dominance and male’s positions of power through rituals. However, the oppression of women goes further: according to Jenny, one of Mitchell’s sources, “Violence against women is encoded in the language used at *nakamal*, where the chief settles

disputes” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 33). Women are compared with plants and animals that need to be tended, tamed, dominated, and controlled (Mitchell, 2011, p. 33). This dehumanization and lack of representation in local judicial processes put women at a significant disadvantage in comparison to men. What is truly fascinating is the disparity between national and local governments and rights. A chief from a Northern island that Mitchell spoke with “often expressed his deep regret that women had been granted equal rights in the constitution at Independence” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 34). On the state level, women in Vanuatu have more protections than women in developed nations such as the United States, who are not explicitly granted equal rights in the constitution – only the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment explicitly protects women’s rights by stating that the right to vote shall not be denied on the basis of sex (U. S. Const. amend. XIX), and the Equal Rights Amendment, which states in section 1 that the “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex (Alice Paul Institute, 2018),” has yet to be passed. Yet there is disconnect between the state government and local chieftainships where that guarantee of equal rights is not met. Mitchell attributes this to the fear of eroding the authority of the chiefs and undermining collective rights by valuing individuals more, affecting such processes as claiming land and the viability of communities (Mitchell, 2011, p. 34). Can women’s rights and the needs of local communities coexist? Feminism and *kastom* in Vanuatu are both shaped heavily by the reaction to colonization, globalization, and capitalism, and Mitchell stresses the need to place these issues into a localized context in order to truly create understanding and the possibility for change.

These articles display a clear desire for a more inclusive, universal feminism that truly works for the betterment of all women, but how realistic is it to achieve? The core of the issue is that Euro-American feminism, the most mainstream school of thought, struggles with

ethnocentrism and remnants of colonialist perspectives that create difficulty when combating the social ills faced by non-European women. The common thread throughout these papers is the call for a balance between universalism and the rights all women need and using relativism to understand the different experiences and needs of women in different cultures and societies without ethnocentrism.

Traditionally Western feminism, postsocialist feminism, and postcolonial feminism have existed in separate spheres treating shared issues as separate problems. There has been a recent trend towards allyship in the form of transnational feminism and the recognition of intersectionality. The next challenge for the global feminist movement is to determine where the line is drawn: are all cultural practices to be viewed through a relativist lens? What can be deemed wrong or abusive to all women, no matter the situation or circumstance? With a continued effort to bring an intersectional understanding and perspective to the challenges faced by feminist activists and advocates, the answers to these questions will be found.



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U. S. Const. amend. XIX