

Contact details :

Heidi Safia Mirza

Institute of Education, University of London

20 Bedford Way, London,

WC1H 0AL.

Email h.mirza@ioe.ac.uk

Plotting a history: Black and postcolonial feminism in 'new times'

Heidi Safia Mirza

Institute of Education , University of London, UK

Abstract

Black feminist thought is grounded in an understanding of the nature of power and the way 'the black/othered woman's' difference' is systematically organised through social relations. Postcolonial feminist approaches enable us to situate the silent 'spectral' power of colonial times as it appears in the production and reproduction of marginalised, racialised and gendered others in new contemporary times. This special issue brings the two perspectives together to explore the complexities of black and ethnicised¹ female marginality through an intersectional analysis where race, class, gender, and other social divisions are theorised as lived realities. Through a variety of methodologies - such as the oral tradition of storytelling in CRT(critical race theory) , embodied autobiography, and geographically embedded longitudinal ethnographies- black and postcolonial feminist scholars chart new perspectives on multiple identity, hybridity, diaspora, religion, culture and sexuality. Exploring issues as diverse as black female marginality in higher education and their regulation and resistance in the neocolonial sites schooling, work, family, and the media, black and postcolonial feminist scholars of colour demonstrate their contribution to critical race and feminist thinking.

Key words: Black feminism; postcolonial feminism; embodied difference; multiple identities; intersectionality

Situating black and postcolonial feminism

The genesis of this special issue, '*Black feminism and postcolonial paradigms: Researching educational inequalities*', was the inaugural seminar for the Centre for Rights Equalities and

Social Justice (CRESJ) at the Institute of Education, University of London in December 2006. Several women of colour now associated with the Centre settled on a theme of black and postcolonial feminism to embrace our commonalities. We were elated at our coming together and that we could collectively celebrate our research and writing in a small corner of a powerful consumingly white institution of higher learning. Emails and notices went out across the UK inviting a broad range of participants. Responses flowed in- they were celebratory and uplifting. Women of colour wanted to join us and share their scholarship in a safe place – and then there was the one email, which signified the turning point. It was from a young black woman. She wrote enthusiastically, “thank you for organising this; I thought black feminism was dead!”. The e-mail’s sense of loss and desire for the articulation of body of scholarship called ‘black feminism’ was a wake up call. I have been long consumed by the desire to celebrate black feminist scholarship and naively assumed that out there black feminism as a body of scholarship was alive and well. But as Gayatri Spivak, cautions, it is the work of the postcolonial feminist to ask the simple question ‘what does this mean? – and begin to plot a history’ (Spivak, 1988:297).

Plotting a history of black and postcolonial feminism is not a simple linear telling. As Suki Ali argues in her think piece here, we need to resist the notion of being situated in a postcolonial trajectory, where we move from an unenlightened primitive past to a civilised enlightened present. A history of a situated black and postcolonial feminism cannot be confined to a chronological unfolding of time and place. The contingent and critical project of black and postcolonial feminism is to chart the story of raced and gendered domination across different landscapes and time lines through the counter memories of black/ ethnicised women (McKittrick 2006). Collectively, we are engaged in the process of quilting a genealogical narrative of ‘otherways of knowing’. Quilting is the art of stitching together pieces of cloth, fragments of memory, linking the past to the present and making it whole (Flannery 2001). This has a powerful meaning for women across cultures and time, and their hidden stories counter the silent consuming whiteness of normative legitimated knowledge and theory.

The scholarship of Black and postcolonial feminists is located in the political, social and economic terrain of our contemporary postcolonial nation states. In the USA, the African American women’s seminal collection “*All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave*” (Hull et al 1982) crystallised black feminist thought. However the African American woman’s intellectual tradition was more than a mere response to invisibility and erasure from the dominant discourses of race, class and gender. Black feminist writers sought to establish an oppositional critical social theory for political empowerment and social justice (James and Busia 1993; Collins 1998). In Britain, Canada, and Australia black and postcolonial feminism was differently located and drew attention to the tensions within the

knowledge production of post Imperial societies. Black, ethnicised and indigenous women writers highlighted the limitations of white feminist theorising and a masculinised, race and multicultural discourse that failed to incorporate an understanding of gendered diversity and difference (Calliste and Dei 2000; Smith 1999; Mirza 1997). Women from the 'global south' - black, postcolonial and antiracist feminists writers - revealed the agency and transversal politics of women in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, India, Asia, and the Middle East, as they engaged in their everyday national and transnational transformative struggles of resistance against poverty, religion, patriarchy and class (Alexander and Mohanty1997; Anthias and Yuval-Davis1992).

The politics of intersectionality

The response to the call for papers for this special issue reassured us that women of colour across the globe are very much engaged and mobilised in the antiracist, antisexist, postcolonial struggle for an equitable and socially just world. However, the email still left us with the troubling question: 'Can we, as women of colour, claim that black and postcolonial feminism - a conscious, meaningful act of political self-identification- still binds us in our different locations and seemingly fragmented struggles in the globalised 21st century?'. To answer this question it is imperative that we return to a fundamental analysis of the multiple and complex ways structures of power reproduce social divisions in the everyday lives of black and ethnicised women. We need to interrogate the way in which power; ideology and identity intersect to obscure social injustice and maintain universal patterns of gendered and racialised of inequality whatever the spatial, cultural and historical specificity of our different globalised locations. As female scholars of colour it is important to hold on to our strategic multiplicity and celebrate our 'difference' (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of 'sameness'.

This brings us to the second question, and the aim of this collection, 'How are raced, classed and gendered boundaries produced and lived through black/postcolonial female subjectivities across time and space?' Black, postcolonial and antiracist feminists have long called for an understanding of the value of an intersectional analysis to explain the way in which power, ideology and identity intersect to maintain patterns and processes of inequality and discrimination which both structure and are reflected in black women's lives (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberley Crenshaw (1989; 1991; Patel 2008) rearticulated the scholarship of black feminists such as Angela Davis, Patricia Hill

Collins and Audrey Lourde. The concept of intersectionality, which aims to reveal the importance of the multiple identities of black and ethnicised women, provides a complex ontology of 'really useful knowledge' which signaled a move away from the additive models of double or triple jeopardy and the seemingly meaningless listing of a never-ending hierarchy of multiple, additive social positions and identities (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006). Women, who are collectively defined as 'black or 'Asian' in official policy and practice have different multiple experiences in terms of their age, sexuality, disability religion or culture. Thus it is argued racism, patriarchy, social class and other systems of oppression simultaneously structure the relative position of these women at any one time creating specific, and varied patterns of inequality and discrimination. It is the cultural and historical specificity of inequality that black, postcolonial, and antiracist feminists stress as important in developing a more holistic intersectional approach to mainstream feminist analysis of women's social disadvantage As Nira Yuval Davis (2006) argues, we need studies that separate out the different levels in which social divisions are constructed and analyse how they are intermeshed with each other in specific historical situations.

Multiple Identities and postcolonial geographies

This special issue explores the evolving articulation of black and postcolonial feminism in the specific context of educational research in different (historical) times (Yuval Davis 2006) and (geographic) places (McKittrick 2006). While the authors within these pages write from their own micro-institutional localised positions in the educational landscapes of school, college, university and the world of work, their experience reveals the unfolding wider macro-institutional materialist project of racism. Having made ancestral colonial, and personal postcolonial journeys from Africa and Asia to the 'new world' of America, the Caribbean, Canada, Britain and Australia, the black and postcolonial feminist scholars in these pages theorise from their multiple positionings and 'other ways of knowing'. However, despite their differences they are seemingly united in the singular political project of black and postcolonial feminism; which is to excavate the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the 'other' as she is produced in a gendered, sexualized, and wholly racialised global discourse (Bhavnani 2001; Mirza 1997).

Cynthia Joseph in her essay '*Postcoloniality and Ethnography: negotiating gender, ethnicity and power*' asks the question: 'How do we understand women's agency and identity practices within a highly ethnicised, stratified and political context like contemporary postcolonial Malaysia? It is in the context of the essentialist ethnic and cultural policies of Malaysia, and in particular the state sanctioned affirmative action policies that Joseph

interrogates the different ways young women position themselves as being Malay-Muslim, Chinese and Indian. She engages Spivak's concept of 'strategic essentialism' to understand the complex articulation of religious, ethnic and classed identities among both herself as the situated insider, and the Malaysian young women in her study. Thus while the young women evoked traditional 'essentialised' ethnic categories to make sense of their gendered positionings and experiences of success and failure in the work place, they also 'shop around' for gendered cultural and educational identity strategies to negotiate economic success. Ultimately, however young Malaysian women are constrained by the material inequalities of their lives and the globalised neo-colonial webs of economic power which display an insatiable hunger for skilled 'ethnic' female labour in the emerging liberalised economies of India, China and Malaysia.

Normative Ideologies of femininity, womanhood and heterosexual identity are seen to cement the hegemonic exploitation of women across cultures and borders (Mohanty 1997). This is no more apparent than within the practice of marriage. Kalwant Bhopal in *Identity, empathy and 'otherness': Asian women, education and dowries in the UK*, argues that we need to understand the experiences of women whose 's lives sit outside of dominant society and who continue to be 'othered' . For second and third generation Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh South Asian women the traditional practice of arranged marriage and dowry giving is shifting in the highly racialised terrain of 21st century Britain. Young Asian women graduates consciously resisted the notion of 'becoming like English people' and symbolically engaged in the practice of dowries, using their educational status as a bargaining resource to secure the marriage of their choosing. Living in a racist British society where they were seen as alien and backward, yet subject to oppressive gendered practices of marriage within their own communities, the young women renegotiated their boundaries of acceptance and conformity within the colonial ideals of bourgeois British family life.

Young women may negotiate their identities but as both Joseph and Bhopal demonstrate, in the context of transnationalism and migration they still firmly live within the dominant modalities of race, class and gender. As researchers, the ethnic and cultural traditions of patriarchy and neocolonialism touches their lives as much as that of their subjects. Drawing on a black and postcolonial feminist methodology, Joseph, a Malaysian Indian woman, and Bhopal, a South Asian British woman are both situated as 'insiders' but also as academic 'outsiders'. However, it is precisely because of their located positionality that they can give a powerful voice their hitherto silenced subjects.

‘Embodied difference’ and institutional practices

A strong theme of ‘embodied difference’ runs through the essays in this issue. Such a notion seeks to make sense of the black female /‘othered’ woman’s symbolic and narrative struggle over the defining materiality of her educational experience. Black feminists and postcolonial feminists of colour place the ‘self’ and the body at the centre of their theorizing on racialised power and gendered patriarchy. However a focus on women’s embodied lived experiences is not to privilege the black/ethnicised female authentic voice when constructing a theoretical and methodological framework. Feminists of colour recognise that while experience is a problematic epistemological concept it is fundamental to black and postcolonial feminist theorising. Black and ethnicised women do not claim to have a special knowledge, or a privileged standpoint, borne out of the collective experience of marginalisation and the mere fact of living life as a ‘black/othered woman’ (hooks 1991; Collins 1990). Such a claim to epistemic privilege would be to assume a naive essentialist universal notion of an homogeneous racialised ‘black’ womanhood, no better in its conception of ‘the self’ and the nature of power than that embodied in the authoritative discourses we seek to challenge (Bar On 1993; Suleri 1993). Appeals to experience risk obscuring regimes of power by naturalising some experiences as normative, and others as not, leaving the processes that structure dominance in tact (Scott 1992). A black and postcolonial feminist standpoint does not valorise experience as an explanation or justification in itself, but should be seen as an *interpretation* of the social world that needs explaining. The essays that address ‘embodied difference’ explore the ways in which raced and gendered human agency frames the black female struggle for life chances and educational opportunities. Focusing on the embodied nature of systematic institutionalised discriminatory practices, they draw on personalised ‘embodied’ black feminist methodologies to demonstrate the processes of ‘being and becoming’ a gendered and raced subject of academic and educational discourse.

In a powerful examination of the diversity discourses in higher education Sara Ahmed in her article, *‘Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists’*, looks at what it means to embody diversity in our institutions of higher education. Taking us on a personal and emotional journey through research, teaching, and into academic leadership, she reveals a particular model of diversity in our organisations which reifies difference as something that exists ‘in’ the bodies of others. Visual images of ‘colourful’ happy faces are used to show how the university has embraced difference. In fact just using the very word ‘diversity’ is seen to ‘do things’ for the institution. The very arrival of the ‘black /othered body into white/normative organisations is used as evidence that spaces of whiteness and privilege no longer exists, and so to speak about racism is to introduce unwanted ‘bad feelings’. Ahmed eloquently argues that as black feminists we need to remain ‘sore’ and

'angry' and refuse to be appropriated through policy and practice as the 'happy objects' of diversity in our universities.

Uvanney Maylor is indeed hurt and 'sore' in her article, *'Is it because I'm Black? A Black female research experience'*. Maylor draws on black feminist/ critical race theory (CRT) to give voice to what is often thought, experienced and internalised, but goes unsaid in the world of the black female researcher. Her personal narrative opens up to public scrutiny deeply hidden feelings produced by being ignored (in favour of a white colleague) , misrecognised (as a junior helper), or hypervisible (as when she travels to Latvia). Illuminating what it means to be a professional black female body out of place in a white institution, she reveals that it can become 'tiresome' when you are constantly ignored, or your ability questioned. However, it can also be a site of privilege and influence, and also happiness, especially when she sees the faces of black and minority ethnic children light up when she enters their classroom. Ultimately naming our experiences is vital if black and ethnicised women are to be recognised by white colleagues first as individuals and secondly, as educated, knowledgeable and competent researchers.

Coping strategies which enable black women to survive in places of higher learning is the theme of Njoke Wane's essay, *'Black Canadian Feminist Thought: Perspectives on Equity & Diversity in the Academy'*. Success among black Canadian women of African descent was not seen in financial terms, but measured by their self-reliance, connectedness to black communities and the healing power of their spirituality. Drawing on the women's spoken 'embodied' experiences, Wane concludes, as an African Canadian feminist, that if we make blackness our starting point, we should also not lose sight of our heterogeneity, nor mask our individual uniqueness. Her plea is that 'Blackness', as a form of consciousness, should not be conflated with 'race', but should be understood in relation to black people's indigenous knowledge, philosophies and epistemologies.

How black feminist knowledge is made and remade in the academy is the subject of Suki Ali's reflections in *'Black feminist praxis: some reflections on pedagogies and politics in higher education'*. Through Ali's embodied positionality, as a student and now lecturer, she situates her intellectually transforming encounters with black feminism and (white) women's studies in the UK. In the context of the transnational and poststructuralist turn in feminist theorising she argues for a conscious engagement with the radical call of black feminist praxis. She asks: 'What is the value-added of black feminism in today's academy and moreover, is it past its sell-by-date?' She suggests certain types of feminist knowledge are produced, exchanged and consumed within higher education with respect to the value of particular kinds of knowledge to our clients/customers/students in different times. She

concludes that black feminist pedagogies, transversal feminist politics, and embodied positionality are vitally important to the contemporary academy in the UK, and are best explored through postcolonial paradigms, which insist on historicising the present.

Embodied interrogation through placing the 'self' in the text is a strategy of black and postcolonial feminist theorizing – however it can also be our undoing. By unveiling our innermost life stories women of colour risk becoming objects for public gaze. Our strategies for resistance become known. Undertaking journeys of self-discovery can be appropriated and recorded as objective knowledge. As Grossberg (1996) cautions we have to remain ever vigilant- the dominant culture achieves hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert and recode meaning for the authoritative other.

Representation and regulation of the black female body

Black and postcolonial feminists continually resist and rename the discursive regulatory effects of gendered and sexualised racialisation. Such resistance is played out in the subjecthood of black and ethnicised women, whose agency challenges and transcends such dominance. Subjectivity in this sense is a powerful, conscious form of political agency for black and ethnicised women who live in the dominant modalities of race, class and gender (Brah 1996). If the representation of black and ethnicised women is traced in history what we see is how she is permitted to appear. We see glimpses of her as she is produced and created for the sustenance of the patriarchal colonial and now postcolonial discourse (Kanneh 1995). She appears and disappears as she is needed, as the dutiful wife and daughter, the hard (but happy and grateful!) worker, the sexually available exotic other, the controlling asexual mother, or simply homogenized as the 'third world' woman (Mohanty 1988). In the patriarchal post imperial project of gendered and sexualised racialisation the 'black/othered' woman is constructed as a passive object, inscribed with meaning and named by those who gaze upon her and 'name' her. However the project of black and postcolonial feminism reasserts black /ethnicised agency in the telling of who we are.

Gloria Ladson-Billings undertakes this task in her essay, *"Who you callin' nappy-headed? A Critical Race Theory look at the construction of Black women,"* she uses the oral narrative methodology of critical race theory (CRT), to showing how racism is a permanent underlying feature of American culture and society. She makes the connection between the atmosphere of hate and intimidation stoked up by the popular press which denigrates African American black womanhood as 'niggers and hoes', and the everyday uncharted characterization of the black woman as a 'despised other' in the classroom. Using films which treat teachers as

'texts', Ladson-Billings show how her students are influenced by the 'normative' representations of black women teachers as unattractive, overbearing, deceitful, lacking moral values, or incompetent. It would seem that black African American women, as teachers and mothers are judged by a separate and different set of standards than white American women about what it means to be a good teacher and/or a good mother. Images originated the times of American slavery, such as the stereotypes of black women as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels still persist in this postmodern era.

In her essay, *'De-colonising practices: Negotiating narratives from racialised and gendered experiences of education'*, Ann Phoenix considers the processes of normalization and representation (i.e. subjectification). She examines how state technologies, such as the education system interpellates (hails through ideology) people as subjects into the dominant gendered and racialised relations of power. Drawing on postcolonial theories of representation and colonisation, she illuminates the ways in which the intersections of racialisation and gender in schools produce constructions of black girls as both inadequate learners with devalued racialised femininities. Caribbean women serial migrants who came to join their parents in post-war Britain reflected back on how they were constructed as both outsiders to the nation and problematic 'West Indian children' in the classroom. Schools became racialised 'contact zones' where they, as young girls, were subjugated as racialised subjects- seen by teachers to embody a lack of ability because of how they spoke, looked and where they came from. In their remembering many came to recognise the racialised western representations that constructed them as inferior. While they were subjected to negative representations that reproduce colonial relations, they used their agency to create 'diaspora space', a place of oppositional meaning which disrupts those remembered relational experiences.

Ladson-Billings and Phoenix reveal the ways in which authoritative knowledge about the black/othered woman is produced, and engulfs our very ways of thinking and knowing ourselves. But are we what we are expected to be or are we much more? The task of the black and postcolonial feminist is to reveal how racism and sexism is legitimated thorough dominant regimes of representation, to refuse the construction of black female other as inferior, and to imagine the 'self' differently- that is, beyond discourse.

Conclusion: black and postcolonial feminism in 'new times'.

The young scholar who asked if 'black feminism was dead' propelled us on Spivak's journey to 'plot a history' and so map the counter narrative of black and postcolonial feminism in 'new times'.

This collection of essays by black and postcolonial feminist scholars working in the field of education is but the tip of an ongoing critical genealogical project to reveal the mechanisms that promote, contest, and resist racist logics and practices in the everyday lives of black and ethnicised women. The Foucauldian method of genealogy attempts a critique of dominant discourses. It draws on knowledges and ways of thinking that are marginalised and stand outside the mainstream (Dean 1994). The retrieval of counter memories and subjugated knowledges, which are thought to lack a history, functions as a challenge to the taken-for-granted normative assumptions of prevailing discourses. The invisibility of black and ethnicised women in much contemporary theorising speaks of the separate narrative constructions of race, gender and class. Black and ethnicised women occupy an ideological blind spot in a racial discourse, where the subject is male; in a gendered discourse, where the subject is white; and a class discourse where race has no place (Prins 2006). In a submerged and hidden world where there is no official language (Christian 1995) and few narratives about that world, except in our hearts and minds – it could be argued that black and ethnicised women inhabit a critical ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1990). It is a space which, because it overlaps the margins of race, gender and class discourses and occupies the empty spaces in between, exists in a vacuum of erasure and contradiction in mainstream theorising. However in this ‘third space’, as in this special issue, women of colour can invoke their agency, speak of their ‘embodied difference’, and imagine questions that open new possibilities of theorising intersectionalities (Carby 2007).

This special issue brings together the complimentary scholarship of black feminism and postcolonial feminism to explore the complexities of black and ethnicised female marginality and agency. Black feminist thought which is grounded in an understanding of the nature of power, draws on an intersectional analysis to explore the way ‘the black/othered woman’s difference’ is systematically organised through the modalities of race gender and class in everyday social relations (Brah 1996). Postcolonial feminist approaches situates the ‘spectral’ power of colonial times as it appears and disappears in the production and reproduction of racialised and gendered knowledges in the spatially challenged present (Subedi and Daza 2008; Ali 2007; Rizvi et al 2006). Critical black and postcolonial feminism is united in its alliance of theory, politics and practice. In this sense praxis is central to our survival as a new social movement.

In the neo-liberal, fragmented, dislocated, experiential reality that is postmodernity we need to hold on to the collective struggle against inequality and for social justice which anchors the black and postcolonial feminist projects. For it seems whether we live in ‘colonial, imperial, past times’ or so called ‘postcolonial, posttrace² new times’ black and ethnicised women remain subject to racialised and sexualised discrimination, exclusion, violence and exploitation (Samantrai 2002). For them power is not diffuse, localised and particular- power is as centralised, secure and

authoritative as it always has been- excluding, defining and self-legitimizing. As female scholars of colour we have to locate our 'differently embodied ' experiences in the materiality of our institutions and social structures of our nation states and consciously valorise and celebrate our collectivity. Black and postcolonial feminism is not dead yet!

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1 In this special issue 'black women' is a collective political term that embraces postcolonial 'women of colour' who share similar marginal locations (Mirza 1997). When specific ethnic, racial or religious groups are discussed , such as African, Caribbean, South Asian or Muslim women , they are identified and highlighted in the articles in terms of their specific ethnicised difference. I use the term 'black and ethnicised women' as *being or becoming* 'ethnicised' brings into play the power relations that inform and structure the gaze of the 'other', While official policy terms such as 'black and minority ethnic women' denotes the social construction of difference through visible racial (black) and cultural (ethnic) markers, it does not emphasise the *process* of racial objectification. (see Bhavnani, Mirza and Meeto 2005).

2 This special journal issue comes in the wake of the election on November 4th 2008 of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States of America. Many media commentaries are hailing this as a new 'postrace era' in which the embodiment of 'race' through skin colour is no longer seen as defining factor. Time Magazine (2008) *U.S Election: Obama's Moment* , September 1st.