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Postcolonialism, feminism and development: intersections and dilemmas

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Abstract: In recent years, postcolonial and feminist theories have had enormous consequences for how development is conceptualized. In light of this, the present paper explores the intersections between postcolonialism, feminism and development. It does so by, first, reviewing the primary issues underpinning postcolonial approaches to development. Secondly, the paper reviews the emergence of postcolonial feminisms and explores the key areas of debate generated by these approaches within development studies. Thirdly, the paper examines some of the dilemmas and criticisms provoked by these approaches, and concludes by exploring the ways in which postcolonial feminist approaches might continue to make significant advancement in rethinking development.

Key words: agency; development; discourse; eurocentrism; feminism; postcolonialism.

I Introduction

In recent years, the ways in which development is written about and analysed have been subject to intense scrutiny, reflecting the influences of broader philosophical and theoretical debates that have swept through western social and political sciences. More specifically, since the widely acknowledged crisis, or 'impasse', in development studies in the mid-1980s (Watts, 1995), it is recognized increasingly that development is about power – its operations, its geographies, its highly uneven distribution and strategies for achieving it. The analysis of power is therefore central to contemporary development studies (Crush, 1995; Radcliffe, 1999). Much of this focus on power has its roots in postcolonial and feminist theories, both of which have had significant consequences for how development is conceptualized. There is

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now a sizeable literature on gender and development[1] and a not insignificant one on postcolonialism and development (see, for example, Slater, 1992a; Crush, 1995; Simon, 1997). It is only relatively recently, however, that analysts have begun to tease out the intersections between feminism, postcolonialism and development (Radcliffe, 1994; Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Schech and Haggis, 2000), and to understand their impacts on contemporary development studies. With this in mind, this paper aims to explore the articulations between postcolonialism, feminism and development. It does so, first, by reviewing the primary issues underpinning postcolonial approaches to development. Secondly, the paper reviews the emergence of postcolonial feminisms and explores the key areas of debate generated by these approaches within development studies. Thirdly, the paper examines some of the dilemmas and criticisms provoked by these approaches, and concludes by exploring ways in which postcolonial feminist approaches might continue to make significant advancement in rethinking development.

II Postcolonialism and development

The possibility of producing a truly de-colonized, postcolonial knowledge in development studies became a subject of considerable debate during the 1990s. Postcolonialism is a difficult and contested term, not least because it is far from clear that colonialism has been relegated to the past (Ashcroft *et al*., 1995: 2). Rather than signalling an epochal shift from colonialism to after-colonialism, postcolonialism refers to ways of criticizing the material and discursive legacies of colonialism (Radcliffe, 1999: 84). Broadly speaking, therefore, postcolonial perspectives can be said to be anti-colonial. In theoretical terms, they have been greatly influenced by Marxism and poststructuralism (Blunt and Wills, 2000), drawing on both the political economy approaches of the former and the cultural and linguistic analyses of the latter. Within the field of development studies, postcolonialism shares similarities with dependency theories. Its aims also overlap with so-called 'populist' trends linked with participatory methods (see Chambers, R., 1983, 1996, 1997, 1998), although these overlaps are rarely acknowledged.[2] However, the politics of postcolonialism often diverge sharply from other perspectives and its radicalism rejects established agendas and accustomed ways of seeing. This means that postcolonialism, like feminism, is a powerful critique of 'development' and an increasingly important challenge to dominant ways of apprehending North–South[3] relations.

A number of core issues underpin postcolonial approaches to development. First, postcolonial critiques stress the need to destabilize the dominant discourses of imperial Europe, including 'development'. These discourses are unconsciously ethnocentric, rooted in European cultures and reflective of a dominant western world-view. Postcolonial approaches problematize the very ways in which the world is known, challenging the unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at the heart of western disciplines that are profoundly insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures. They challenge the meaning of development as rooted in colonial discourse depicting the North as advanced and progressive and the South as backward, degenerate and primitive. Writers such as van der Post (1955, 1958) began to challenge this assumption by referring to hunter-gathers as the first affluent peoples.

Postcolonialism has prompted questions about whether such indigenous systems of equity, reciprocity and communalism are more advantageous to peoples of the South than the pursuit of capitalism, with its emphasis on individual wealth and incorporation into the global economy. The superiority of modern industrialization and technological progress is increasingly questioned, creating alternative knowledges to reshape views of non-western societies and their environments.

Secondly, postcolonial approaches invoke an explicit critique of the spatial metaphors and temporality employed in western discourses. Whereas previous designations of the 'Third World' signalled both spatial and temporal distance – 'out there' and 'back there' – the postcolonial perspective insists that the 'other' world is 'in here' (Chambers, I., 1996: 209). The 'Third World' is integral to what the west refers to as 'modernity' and 'progress'. It contributes directly to the economic wealth of western countries through its labour and through its exploitation. In addition, the modalities and aesthetics of the South have partially constituted western languages and cultures. Postcolonialism, therefore, attempts to re-write the hegemonic accounting of time (history) and the spatial distribution of knowledge (power) that constructs the Third World.

Thirdly, postcolonial critiques challenge the experiences of speaking and writing by which dominant discourses come into being. For example, a term such as 'the Third World' homogenizes peoples and countries and carries other associations – economic backwardness, the failure to develop economic and political order, and connotations of a binary contest between 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other' (Darby, 1997: 2–3) – which are often inscribed in development writings. These practices of naming are not innocent. Rather they are part of the process of 'worlding' (Spivak, 1990: 114), or setting apart certain areas of the world from others. Said (1978) has shown how knowledge is a form of power and, by implication, violence; it gives authority to the possessor of knowledge. Knowledge has been, and to large extent still is, controlled and produced in the west. For Sardar (1999), the real power of the west lies not in its massive economic development and technical advances but, rather, in its power to define, represent and theorize. While this might overplay to some extent the power of discourse, it nevertheless has huge political ramifications. The *idea* of development has enabled the west to appropriate and control the past, present and future of the non-west, a fact that postcolonialism seeks to disrupt.

Finally, postcolonialism attempts to recover the lost historical and contemporary voices of the marginalized, the oppressed and the dominated, through a radical reconstruction of history and knowledge production (Guha, 1982). It challenges the notion of a single path to development and demands acknowledgement of a diversity of perspectives and priorities. The politics of defining and satisfying needs is a crucial dimension of current development thought, to which the concept of agency is central. Who voices the development concern, what power relations are played out, how do participants' identities and structural roles in local and global societies shape their priorities and which voices are excluded as a result? One aim of postcolonial approaches is to attempt to overcome inequalities by opening up spaces for the agency of non-western peoples, and exploring how nations and cultures outside the west have developed their own autonomous knowledges about development (Sardar, 1999). Whether it succeeds in doing so is a highly contentious issue that is taken up later in this paper. However, the work of academics in the South has, to

some extent, led to a questioning of authorization and authority. By what right and on whose authority does one claim to speak on behalf of others? On whose terms is space created in which they are allowed to speak? Are we merely trying to incorporate and subsume non-western voices into our own canons? It is no longer feasible to represent the peoples of the Third World as passive, helpless victims. Their voices are now being heard, and their ideas are increasingly being incorporated into grassroots development policies, if not yet at the level of the World Bank.

Despite this, subjecting development to postcolonial critique might be considered a form of intellectual faddism (Crush, 1995: 4), with some critics arguing that while there are pressing material issues such as poverty in the world, concerns with the *language* of development are esoteric (San Juan, 1998). However, other critics have demonstrated that language is fundamental to the way we order, understand, intervene and justify those interventions (see, for example, Escobar, 1984, 1988, 1995a, b; Pieterse, 1991; Slater, 1992a, b). As Crush argues, postcolonialism offers new ways of understanding what development is and does, and why it is so difficult to think beyond it. The texts of development are written in a representational language – metaphors, images, allusion, fantasy and rhetoric – the imagined worlds bearing little resemblance to the real world. Development writing often produces and reproduces misrepresentation. Postcolonialism seeks to remove western negative stereotypes about people and places from such discourses (Simon, 1997). It challenges us to rethink, for example, categories such as 'Third World' and 'Third World women', and to understand how location, economic role, social dimensions of identity and the global political economy differentiate between groups and their opportunities for development.

III Feminism, postcolonialism and development

The most exciting, and far-reaching, interaction between theory and practice has been, as Munck (1999) argues, between feminism, postcolonialism and development. Feminism and postcolonialism intersect around a number of key issues that offer a potent challenge to dominant western notions of development.

1 The hegemony of western feminism

Until the 1980s, there was a tendency to assume a commonality in the forms of women's oppression and activism worldwide (see, for example, Morgan, 1984). Western feminists assumed that their political project was universal, and that women globally faced the same universal forms of oppression. However, divisions among women based on nationality, race, class, religion, region, language and sexual orientation have proved more divisive within and across nations than western theorists acknowledged or anticipated. At an abstract level, assumptions by western feminists about what their political project entails have been called into question by a range of criticisms under the broad rubric of postcolonialism. Encounters with different feminisms and different gender relations have raised issues about what exactly it means to be feminist and have ensured that a western-centric political vision is no longer acceptable. Since the 1980s, black feminists, in particular, have

explored the ways in which feminism is historically located in the dominant discourses of the west, a product of western cultural politics and therefore reflecting western understandings of sexual politics and gender relations. Indeed, in many cultures (particularly in the South) feminism is associated with cultural imperialism. In their influential essay, Amos and Parmar (1984) trace the historical relationship between western feminism and imperial ideologies, institutions and practices. They argue that like gender, the category of feminism emerged from the historical context of modern European colonialism and anti-colonial struggles; histories of feminism must therefore engage with its imperialist origins.

Western feminism's unbecoming past was first exposed in the 1970s and 1980s inspired by an outpouring of critical work by black feminists (Dubois, 1978; Anzaldua and Moraga, 1981; Davis, 1982; Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1986), which began to have a huge influence on feminism. In the British context, careful literary and historical work has made it impossible to refute the claim that white British women's historical experience, in all its complexity and variation, was often bound up culturally, economically and politically with imperial concerns and interests.[4] As Burton (1999: 218) argues, however, the original intention of Amos and Parmar's essay was 'not to clear the way for a more politically accountable historiography of Euro-American women's movements, but rather to make space for histories of black women, women of colour, and anti-colonialist and nationalist women'. She contends that:

> Before the 1980s, it was possible for even some of the most accomplished feminist historians in the West to express surprise that there had been women's movements and feminist cultures outside Europe and North America before the 1960s, even as they failed to realise the neocolonialist effect this kind of ignorance was having on the production of postcolonial counter-histories.

Mohanty (1988) produced an enormously influential analysis of the insufficiency of western epistemological frameworks for recovering, let alone understanding, the cultural and historical meanings of women's experiences and structural locations outside the west. Her criticism of the invisibility of black and Third World women in histories of feminism precipitated an outpouring of publications.[5] The outcome of this feminist and anti-imperialist scholarship has been an attempt to re-orient western feminisms, such that they are no longer perceived as exclusive and dominant but as part of a plurality of feminisms, each with a specific history and set of political objectives, as well as sharing some common ground. Contrary to the widespread belief that the inspiration, origins and relevance of feminism are bourgeois or western, related to a particular ideology, strategy or approach, it is now recognized that feminism does not simply originate in the west. There are many incidents of precolonial women's movements around the world and various forms of feminism have existed and continue to exist across cultures.

Black feminist and postcolonial critiques have also offered more profound examinations of the racism and ethnocentrism at the heart of (white) western feminisms. As bell hooks (1984: 8–9) argues:

> All too frequently in the women's movement it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by simply adopting the appropriate feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor. To a grave extent such thinking prevented white feminists from understanding and overcoming their own sexist-

racist attitudes toward black women. They could pay lip service to the idea of sisterhood and solidarity between women but at the same time dismiss black women.

The relationship between (white) western and 'other' feminisms has often been adversarial, partly because of the failure of white women to recognize that they stand in a power relationship with black women that is a legacy of imperialism, and partly because the concepts central to feminist theory in the west become problematic when applied to black women (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). One example is the explanation given for inequalities in gender relations. Many black and 'Third World' activists object to western feminism that depicts men as the primary source of oppression. This is because for black women there is no single source of oppression; gender oppression is inextricably bound up with 'race' and class. There is perhaps a tendency in some of this criticism to homogenize 'western feminism' – socialist feminists also identify capital as a source of oppression (Delphy, 1984), and lesbian feminists have criticized marginalization on the basis of sexuality (Bell and Klein, 1996). However, this criticism has also forced recognition that assumptions at the heart of white western feminism do not reflect the experience of black women (Carby, 1983; Nain, 1991). Furthermore, in many cultures black women often feel solidarity with black men and do not advocate separatism; they struggle with black men against racism, and against black men over sexism. These debates have generated theories that attempt to explain the interrelationship of multiple forms of oppression, such as race, class, imperialism and gender, without arguing that all oppression derives ultimately from men's oppression of women.

Similar criticisms have been levelled at understandings of the public–private dichotomy. A large part of western feminist literature is dedicated to critiquing the separation of public and private spheres, arguing that it devalues women's contribution to society, and that it has been used to confine women and inhibit their input. A major problem with this kind of criticism is that it ignores the contentions of some commentators in other parts of the world that the private realm does indeed exist separately from the public one, but that both domains are needed and political. For example, instead of motherhood being a private occupation forced on some women, which limits their political inputs or contributions, it is actually reconstructed as a chosen political occupation with important social and economic repercussions. The activities of some Islamist feminists and the Argentinian Mothers of Disappeared (Fisher, 1993) are examples where women have sought an empowering 'private' function, challenging western feminist assumptions about the home, family and motherhood as a site of oppression.[6] More broadly, many poor women of the South resent the bourgeois preoccupations of western feminisms. Economic exploitation and political oppression, as well as provision of basic needs such as clean water and children's education, are seen as more pertinent than issues of sexual politics and gender oppression that often motivate middle-class feminism in the North (Schech and Haggis, 2000: 88).[7] Differences in tradition, culture, personality, beliefs and desires, therefore, demand the interrogation and destabilization of dominant western feminist discourses. Postcolonial approaches seek to 'provincialize' (Chakrabarty, 1992) western feminisms rather than see them as a paradigmatic form of feminism *per se*.

2 Universalism, difference and discourses of development

The ways in which western women represent their southern counterparts, and the power relationships inherent in this, have increasingly been brought under scrutiny. As the 'Third World' is frozen in time, space and history, so this is particularly the case with 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 1988). Carby (1983) writes:

> Feminist theory in Britain is almost wholly Eurocentric and, when it is not ignoring the experience of black women at 'home', it is trundling 'Third World women' onto the stage only to perform as victims of 'barbarous', 'primitive' practices in 'barbarous', 'primitive' societies.

Western feminists have been criticized for universalizing their own particular perspectives as normative, essentializing women in the South as tradition-bound victims of timeless, patriarchal cultures, and reproducing the colonial discourses of mainstream, 'male-stream' scholarship (Carby, 1983: 71). What Mohanty (1988) calls the 'colonialist move' arises from the bringing together of a binary model of gender, which sees 'women' as an *a priori* category of oppressed, with an 'ethnocentric universality', which takes western locations and perspectives as the norm. The effect is to create a stereotype – 'Third World woman' – that ignores the diversity of women's lives in the South across boundaries of class, ethnicity and so on, and reproduces 'Third World difference'. This is a form of 'othering', a reprivileging of western values, knowledge and power (hooks, 1984; Ong, 1988; Trinh, 1989; Spivak, 1990). Mohanty argues that western feminism is too quick to portray women in the South as 'victims', to perceive all women as oppressed and as the subjects of power.

This assumption of sameness incurred the resentment of many 'Third World' women at the UN conferences on women in Mexico City (1975) and Copenhagen (1980) and opened deep divisions. Heated debates at these conferences highlighted the profound differences amongst women across the global divides of North/South and east/west, as well as within regions along class and political lines. The theoretical fall-out from these debates is an emphasis on difference as opposed to universalism. The criticisms of black feminists and non-western women living in the west (for example, Mani, 1992), together with input from western feminists themselves (for example, Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996), has enabled western feminism to move on from notions of global sisterhood, to acknowledge differences, deconstruct othering processes and celebrate diversity and multiplicity (Flew *et al.*, 1999). However, Narayan (1997, 1998) sounds a cautionary note. In trying to account for difference between women, seemingly universal essentialist generalizations about 'all women' are replaced by culture-specific essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as 'western culture', 'non-western cultures', 'western women', 'Third World women', and so forth. Feminist writings about women in the South, therefore, risk falling into the trap of cultural essentialism. The resulting portraits of 'Western women', 'Third World Women', 'African women', 'Indian women', 'Muslim women', 'post-communist women', or the like, as well as the picture of the 'cultures' that are attributed to these various groups of women, often remain fundamentally essentialist. They depict as homogeneous groups of heterogeneous people whose values, interests, ways of life and moral and political commitments are internally plural and divergent (Narayan, 1998: 87–88).

The consequence is 'an ongoing practice of "blaming culture" ' for problems in 'non-western' contexts and communities (Narayan, 1997: 51).[8]

The tendency of western feminism to theorize difference in universalizing ways is also problematic. As Flew *et al*. (1999) point out, western feminists fail to explicitly acknowledge that the way they frame the debate about difference, even in reference to crossnational experiences, is the product of specific western experiences of identity formation. Difference, and how feminists and women activists negotiate this, varies both geographically and temporally. Whereas western feminists might emphasize difference, women's movements in African contexts, for example, have often suppressed difference to build coalitions within their fractured societies (Flew *et al*., 1999: 672). As Flew argues, examining how such dialogues about difference have evolved in specific contexts should encourage western feminists to reflect more critically on what historical, social, political and economic conditions have shaped their understandings of difference.[9]

3 The politics of speaking and writing

Postcolonial feminisms seek to disrupt the power to name, represent and theorize by challenging western arrogance and ethnocentrism, and incorporating the voices of marginalized peoples. Women in the South have been particularly concerned with contesting the power to name, including the use of terms such 'primitive', 'native', 'traditional' and 'Third World women'. The power of western feminism to speak for women elsewhere has not changed since colonial times. As Mohanty (1988) argues, black and Southern women are constructed as 'other', located outside white, middle-class norms. Diversities among women (in terms of class, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexuality and so on) are erased by monolithic and singular epithets such as 'Third World women'. Trinh (1989) describes the exclusionary tactics of western feminism that make the concerns of 'Third World women' 'special' because they are not 'normal', because they are other, and because they are not written by white women. She writes (Trinh, 1989: 82):

> Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on being among the few women chosen for a 'Special Third World Women's Issue' or on being the only Third World woman at readings, workshops and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go, we become someone's private zoo.

White western academics are empowered (economically and socially) to make women in other cultures the object of their investigations, when the reverse is often neither possible nor feasible. For example, Sittirak (1998: 119) describes her experiences as a Thai woman studying in Canada:

> Officially, there are no regulations to prevent me from exploring Canadian or any other ethnic groups. However, like many other 'international students' who received scholarships from development projects, it implicitly seemed that we 'should' focus on our own issues in our homes. That is the way it is. At that moment, I did not question as to why a Thai student had to focus on Thai issues, while Canadian students had much more academic privilege and freedom to study and speak about any women's issues in any continent from around the world.

The consequence of these criticisms is that the presumed 'authority' and 'duty' of western academics to represent the whole world is increasingly being questioned both within and without its ideological systems (Duncan and Sharp, 1993). Western feminists have increasingly begun to recognize that international feminism is constituted by a multiplicity of voices, including those of women in the South. The challenge for feminist scholarship is to transcend the colonizing boundaries of modernist discourse, which demands the recognition of difference and the multiplicity of axes and identities that shape women's lives. Greater emphasis is now placed on the 'positionality' of the researcher in relationships of power. As Duncan and Sharp (1993) argue:

> It is much more than a question of being culturally sensitive or 'politically correct' . . . it requires a continual and radical undermining of the ground upon which one has chosen to stand, including, at times, the questioning of one's own political stance.

Black feminists and women in the South are fighting for spaces in which to articulate their own demands and shape their own political agendas. Furthermore, marginalized women are resisting their representation by elite women from within their own cultures, many of whom are now located within the western academy. As one scholar comments:

> Frankly, I'm very tired of having other women interpret for us, other women sympathise with us. I'm interested in articulating our own directions, our own aspirations, our own past, in our own words . . . (Skonaganleh: R'a, in Sittirak, 1998: 135).

Taking into account the criticisms that black feminists in particular have articulated regarding the exclusionary tactics of white feminism, constant reflection on the creation and production of knowledge remains important. As hooks (1990: 132) argues:

> if we do not interrogate our motives, the direction of our work, continually, we risk furthering a discourse on difference and otherness that not only marginalises people of color but actively eliminates the need of our presence.

Spivak (1990) takes this argument a step further by arguing that western feminists need to acknowledge not only the situatedness of their knowledges (i.e., their cultural specificity and, therefore, their partiality), but also to 'unlearn' their privilege as loss. This involves working back critically through one's history, prejudices and learned responses. Unlearning one's privilege by considering it as one's loss involves a double recognition. Firstly, that those privileges (race, class, nationality, gender and so on) may have prevented us from gaining certain knowledges. This is not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are simply not able to comprehend by reason of our social and cultural positions. In order to unlearn these privileges western feminists need to work hard at gaining some knowledge of others who occupy those spaces most closed to their view. Secondly, recognizing the importance of attempting to speak to those others in a way that they might take us seriously and, most importantly, be able to answer back. Postcolonial feminisms, therefore, allow for competing and disparate voices among women, rather than reproducing colonialist power relations where knowledge is produced and received in the west, and white, middle-class women have the power to speak for their 'silenced sisters' in the South (Amadiume, 1997).

4 Agency in development and knowledge construction

There are now well established debates concerning representation, essentialism and difference, which have made researching and writing about gender relations and 'women', especially outside one's own cultural milieu, an incredibly complex topic. In the face of sustained criticism, many western feminists are now acutely sensitive to the intersections of power with academic knowledge and their privilege in relation to 'other' women, and are developing more ethical ways of researching and writing (Madge, 1993; Radcliffe, 1994; Burman, 1995). A postcolonial narrative of identity formation has been used to create a new politics of representation, which sees subjects as fractured and mutually involved in the construction of identities. For example, Robinson (1994) attempts to displace the privileged fixed position of the researcher, to deconstruct the dualism between 'self-researcher' and 'other-researched', and instead to find a 'third space' where mediations of meanings and interactions of interpretations become the object of investigation. Crucial to this is a recognition that the subjectivities of both researcher and researched are mutually constructed through the research process, and that meanings and interactions are also mediated, as is knowledge itself. Transforming the research process in this way involves recognizing that the researcher does not have unilateral control over the research process and the need to 'speak with' rather than to or for the people with whom one is engaged in research. As Spivak (1990) argues, 'speaking with' people from other places and cultures involves openness to their influence and the possibility of them 'speaking back'. It also links to broader notions of breaking with Eurocentric concepts of development and finding other ways of knowing and being.

The intersections of postcolonialism and feminism have clearly had significant influences upon development theory and practice, but they are not beyond criticism and still pose significant dilemmas for critical development studies.

IV The dilemmas of postcolonialism/postcolonial feminisms

One of the major dilemmas for postcolonialism is the charge that it has become institutionalized, representing the interests of a western-based intellectual élite who speak the language of the contemporary western academy, perpetuating the exclusion of the colonized and oppressed (Ahmad, 1992; McClintock, 1992; Watts, 1995; Loomba, 1998). Moreover, critics suggest that greater theoretical sophistication has created greater obfuscation; postcolonialism is too theoretical and not sufficiently rooted in material concerns (Ahmad, 1992; Dirlik, 1994). Emphasis on discourse detracts from an assessment of material ways in which colonial power relations persist. As Dirlik (1994: 353) argues, '[It] is remarkable . . . that a consideration of the relationship between postcolonialism and global capitalism should be absent from the writings of postcolonial intellectuals'. Debates about postcolonialism and globalization have largely proceeded in relative isolation from one another, and to their mutual cost (Hall, 1996: 257). Economic relations and their effects elude representation in much of postcolonial studies (Eagleton, 1994).

Some critics berate postcolonial theory for ignoring urgent life-or-death questions (San Juan, 1998). To have greater immediacy in critical development studies, post-

colonial approaches might consider questions of inequality of power over and control of resources, human rights, global exploitation of labour, child prostitution and genocide. With some exceptions (for example, the writings on postdevelopment by such authors as Esteva (1987) and Escobar (1992, 1995b)), postcolonialism cannot easily be translated into action on the ground and its oppositional stance has not had much impact on the power imbalances between North and South. It also tends to be preoccupied with the past and has failed to say much about postcolonial futures. (Spivak's (1999) attempt to describe a responsible role for the postcolonial critic in her critique of transnational globalization is one exception.) Meanwhile, ethnocentric representations continue to disadvantage the South, and are evident in sources ranging from popular media to World Bank reports.

Despite these criticisms, however, postcolonial approaches do have some significance for development. As Crush suggests, development texts are 'avowedly strategic and tactical', promoting and justifying certain interventions and delegitimizing and excluding others. Power relations are clearly implied in this process; certain forms of knowledge are dominant and others are excluded. The texts of development contain silences. It is important to ask, therefore, who is silenced, and why. Ideas about development are not produced in a social, institutional or literary vacuum. Rather:

> They are . . . assembled within a vast hierarchical apparatus of knowledge, production and consumption sometimes known, with metaphorical precision, as the 'development industry'. This industry is itself implicated in the operation of networks of power and domination that, in the twentieth century, have come to encompass the entire globe (Crush, 1995: 5).

A postcolonial approach to development literature, therefore, can say a great deal about the apparatuses of power and domination within which those texts are produced, circulated and consumed. Clearly, development discourse promotes and justifies very real interventions with very real consequences. It is, therefore, imperative to explore the links between the words, practices and institutional expressions of development, and between the relations of power that order the world and the words and images that represent the world. Otherwise, postcolonial approaches do risk a 'descent into discourse', where the effects of development languages are confined to the text and the possibilities of effecting change are denied (Crush, 1995).

Similarly, shifts towards cultural explanations and concerns with discourse and representation in feminist development theory have been ridiculed by many activists (in the South and post-communist contexts, but also from within western feminism[10]) as elitist and removed from reality. The problem is often posed as a schism between theory and practice, or the gap between western feminist theorizing and the practical needs of women globally. Theoretical preoccupations are not easily translated into direct politics, and are accused of shifting the focus away from the material problems of women's lives. Many critics argue that organizing and obtaining women's human rights cannot be removed from ensuring a better life for men and women in societies characterized by poverty and a lack of freedom and democratic norms; postcolonialism has been charged with ignoring these issues. Concerns with representation, text and imagery are perceived as too far removed from the exigencies of the daily lives of millions of impoverished people. One response has

been a rejection by some feminists of postcolonialism, and an objection to the emphasis on difference and discourse away from material conditions. These objections are based around the notion that 'poverty is real' and not simply discursive. Jackson (1997: 147) is one such scathing critic of 'postist' feminist understandings of poverty and gender, 'where culture, ideas and symbols are discursively interesting and constitutive of power, whilst materiality is of questionable status, and at least suspect', and where poverty becomes 'largely a state of mind' rather than a matter of material struggle for survival. She argues that real women and the challenges facing them get lost in the morass of text, image and representation. The rejection of political economy and the embracing of poststructural and postcolonial approaches, therefore, is in danger of 'chucking the baby out with the bathwater' (Udayagiri, 1995: 164); in dismissing the universalist assumptions of political economy the material problems of the daily existences of many women are also erased. Perrons (1999) makes a similar point in arguing that political economy still matters, and should respond to the challenges posed by 'postist' critiques. She argues that political economy and cultural approaches should work in tandem to critique the dominant order, particularly through the conceptual integration of production and consumption in their class and gender dimensions (see also Fagan, 1999).

Postcolonial feminisms tend to avoid the trap of cultural relativism, which has been one response to dealing with difference. Proponents of cultural relativism suggest that the solution to imperialism and universalism be through respect of difference in a plurality of identity politics. However, this offers little assistance in terms of dealing with some of the complex issues confronting international feminist movements. By refusing to theorize cultural dominance, relativists implicitly evaluate all cultural positions as equal. This gives them no basis for making moral judgements about social justice in terms of feminist aspirations to deal with gender inequality and patriarchal power. It also ignores differences (class, regional, religious, ethnic) between women within specific cultural locations (Schech and Haggis, 2000). In addition, the 'culture' that is preserved through such respect is often a patriarchal one that preserves male privilege at women's expense. As Goetz (1991: 146) argues, at the UN International Conferences, 'official' feminisms (often allied to and representing national governments and their political agendas) have used arguments about 'cultural respect' to block more radical, 'unofficial' feminisms that pose a greater threat to the status quo.

The underlying problem is that relativist arguments share a view of cultures and identities as bounded, coherent and autonomous. Such notions have been rejected, not least because this replicates notions of culture informing conservative fundamentalisms in a variety of contexts (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1995). Moreover, replacing universal sameness with cultural difference does not disrupt colonial power relations; cultural difference can be used to deny any possibility of different women 'becoming the same' (i.e., achieving equality). Women in the South are always marked by difference, since cultural difference is also racialized (Frankenberg and Mani, 1993; Narayan, 1998). Postcolonial feminist scholarship has warned against this simple plurality of feminisms organized around some absolute conception of national and/or cultural difference. As Chow (1990) argues, 'it is when the West's "other women" are prescribed their "own" national and ethnic identity in this way that they are most excluded from having a claim to the reality of their existence'. The

real challenge lies in finding an alternative to false universalisms that subsume difference under hegemonic western understandings, and to relativism that would abandon any universalist claim in favour of reified and absolute conceptions of difference. As Spivak (1990) argues there is still a need for greater sensitivity to the relationship between power, authority, positionality and knowledge. The implications of western feminists writing about women outside their own cultural milieu must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship; in other words, western domination of the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas.

V Conclusions and ways forward

Despite criticisms, postcolonial approaches point towards a significant advancement in development studies. They demonstrate how the production of western knowledge forms is inseparable from the exercise of western power (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990; Young, 1990). They also attempt to loosen the power of western knowledge and reassert the value of alternative experiences and ways of knowing (Fanon, 1968; Thiong'o, 1986; Spivak, 1987; Bhabha, 1994). They articulate clearly some difficult questions about writing the history of 'development', about imperialist representations and discourses surrounding 'the Third World' and about the institutional practice of development itself. As Darby (1997: 30) argues, postcolonialism has an expansive understanding of the potentialities of agency. It shares a social optimism with other critiques, such as feminism, which has helped generate substantial changes in political practice. Therefore, despite the seeming impossibility of transforming North–South relations by politics of difference and agency alone, postcolonialism is a much-needed corrective to the Eurocentrism and conservatism of much writing on development.

Postcolonial feminisms, in particular, have made important contributions in theorizing both power and knowledge and the significance of discourse, which generates very real interventions with very real effects (Rose, 1987; Rajan, 1993). Postcolonial feminist approaches demand that we are able to see, responsibly and respectfully, from another's point of view. However, it is important that they also engage with material issues of power, inequality and poverty, and resist focusing on text, imagery and representation alone. Strategies must be found for an active feminism that can make a difference. This involves combining the material with the symbolic and encourages the building of coalitions across differences. It demands, first, a material analysis 'to point to the consequences and interrelations of different sites of oppression: class, race, nation and sexuality' (Goetz, 1991: 151) and, secondly, a recognition of the partial and situated quality of knowledge claims (Haraway, 1991). Therefore, western feminism has to see itself as simply another partial and local knowledge, constrained by its boundaries and the limited nature of viewpoint. Postcolonial approaches perceive all knowledge as contestable, in contrast to the hands-off 'respect' of cultural relativists. Certain issues will unite women cross-culturally (e.g., sexist oppression); other struggles, such as those for racial justice or national liberation, might mean confrontation between women. Stereotypes and generalizations need to be problematized.

The challenge is to produce something constructive out of disagreement, and to combine material concerns and emphasis on local knowledges with postcolonial and poststructuralist dismantling of knowledge claims. Ferguson (1998: 95) theorizes this as a new 'ethico-politics'. She suggests that the problem that many feminists need to confront is that they are located in the very global power relations that they might aspire to change, hence there is a 'danger of colluding with knowledge production that valorises status quo economic, gender, racial and cultural inequalities'. There is a need for self-reflexivity, recognition of the negative aspects of one's social identity and devaluation of one's moral superiority to build 'bridge identities' across difference. This allows other knowledges to talk back, and creates a 'solidarity between women that must be struggled for rather than automatically received' (Ferguson, 1998: 109). This does not mean generalizations cannot be made, but it puts the emphasis back on how they are made. As Schech and Haggis (2000: 113) argue, these postcolonial feminist approaches to development are not simply about deconstructing western feminisms. Rather they provide a more comprehensive project of remoulding a conceptual framework 'capable of embracing a global politics of social justice in ways which avoid the "colonizing move" '.

Postcolonial feminisms can contribute to new ways of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world. Feminist research in global contexts involves shifting the unit of analysis from local, regional and national culture to relations and processes across cultures. Grounding analyses in particular, local feminist praxis is necessary, but understanding the local in relation to larger, crossnational processes is also important. As Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue, there is a need for a 'comparative, relational feminist praxis that is transnational in its response to, and engagement with, global processes of colonisation'. This involves acknowledging, and working through, the productive tension between the 'centrifugal force of discrepant feminist histories and the promising potential of political organising across cultural boundaries' (Sinha *et al.*, 1999: 1). It also requires working with women at grassroots level in different cultural contexts, breaking down hierarchies of knowledge/power that privilege the expert/outsider, undermining western universalisms and providing a basis for a new understanding of global diversity (Marchand and Parpart, 1995: 19). Here there are clear parallels with approaches in anthropology and models of local hybrid cultures, which challenge the orthodoxies of western thinking by bringing local knowledge to the fore in ways that dismantle the *a priori* categories of feminist theory. It is also reflected in the rise of new social movements in the South that is symptomatic of, and feeds into, moves towards a new societal and development paradigm. In Latin America and South Africa, the very ideas of democracy, community and development are being reinvented in a remarkable flourishing of grassroots activity (Alvarez and Escobar, 1992; Munck, 1999) from which genuine alternative development strategies might arise (Friedmann, 1994).

The tensions and dilemmas in new ways of conceiving a crosscultural feminist politics should both inform, and be informed by, postcolonialism. Criticism from black women and feminists in the South has had a considerable impact on gendered approaches within development studies. They have demonstrated 'why women are important, and why gender is an indispensable concept in the analysis of political-cultural movements, of transition, and of social change' (Moghadam, 1994: 17). They

also suggest that western researchers and observers should not denigrate alternative modes of thought on issues of human development. Scholars and activists in the South can depend upon existing legacies of indigenous systems together with the prevailing knowledges about them to formulate an authentic theory of human development (Mangena, in Amadiume, 2000: 176). This more holistic understanding of development would put human survival and non-western philosophies at the centre, producing alternative understandings based on relevant and empowering ideas generated by indigenous cultures. These ideas have philosophical merit in their search for an alternative theory of human development and for the emancipation of women. As Amadiume suggests, they represent an informed contribution to the global debate on human development and feminist methodology, and they should certainly inform the ways in which outsiders approach research in the contemporary South. Postcolonial feminisms, therefore, have the potential to contribute to the critical exploration of relationships between cultural power and global economic power. Moreover, they point towards a radical reclaiming of the political that is occurring in the field of development and in the broader arena of societal transformation.

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Notes

1. There are literally thousands of books on this sub-field that cover theoretical and practical issues ranging across political, cultural, economic and social concerns. A useful recent collection of key papers in these areas is found in Visvanathan *et al.* (1997).
2. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to these commonalities.
3. I use the terms North and South to distinguish between the former colonial powers and their former colonies. I consider them preferable to First World/Third World, 'developed'/'developing', while recognizing that such binaries can hide the real causes of oppression and exploitation.
4. See, for example, Ferguson (1992); Midgley (1992); Melman (1992); Ware (1994); Lewis (1996). We should not forget, however, that some British feminist movements have acted politically to oppose such hegemonies, for example, the Greenham Common women in the context of east/west geopolitics.
5. These focused especially on Indian and Egyptian women's movements (Baron, 1994; Badran, 1995; Jayawardena, 1995; Southard, 1995), but also on countries and cultures having less self-evident (or less well known) relationships to European empires, such as Iran (Kandiyoti, 1991; Shahidian, 1995; Afary, 1996).
6. This is not to argue, of course, that mobilizing around 'private issues' is always empowering in terms of challenging entrenched gender ideologies or strategic interests.
7. Similar tensions exist between women in east and west and there is now a significant body of criticism emanating from women in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (see Drakuli¢, 1993; Einhorn, 1993; Funk, 1993; Funk and Muella, 1993).
8. See also El Saadawi (1997); Schech and Haggis (2000: 103–104).
9. On this, see Goetz (1991); Friedman (1995); Felski (1997); Benhabib (1993).

10. Some feminist scholars believe that the adoption of postmodernism entails the destruction of feminism, since feminism itself depends on a relatively unified notion of the social subject 'woman', which postmodernism attacks (see Di Stefano, 1990).

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