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## Review

# Feminism and the dilemma of solidarity

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**This article shows that solidarity, a primarily positive force, creates a dialectic dilemma. It is based, a priori, on the notions of linking and strengthening but unless it is wisely employed it risks creating unnecessary divisions between various groups of people and their collective memories, which results in weakening them. I focus on the positive outcomes of solidarity then I discuss the divisions it can possibly create in today's global world emphasizing those affecting feminism. On the one hand, solidarity unites people from different places and walks of life and uncovers collective memories but it goes beyond the local. Subsequently one is not trapped in the amnesia created sometimes by the control of memory. Furthermore, it strengthens various creative groups by networking them with others who have the same interests. On the other hand, it sometimes diminishes identification with one's own collective memory, which constitutes her/ his roots, thus exposing a society or certain groups in it for decomposition strategies in which the more powerful wins. This is especially true in the case of women and feminism. Women, in the so-called underdeveloped countries, are presented with feminist models that come mainly from USA and Western Europe; and they are coerced into accepting these models as 'the ideal'. However, these models do not take into consideration the specificity of 'other' women's conditions and because they are imported as final models, they are not open for the classic process of reshaping and evolution. Hence they could entrap solidarity rather than make it enabling. I suggest that the dialectic dilemma of solidarity can be resolved by rooting solidarity in local collective memories rather than negating them and by taking into consideration the concepts of scale and proportion.**

**Keywords:** Feminism, dilemma, solidarity, force

## INTRODUCTION

Solidarity is based, a priori, on the notion of linking and strengthening by grouping diverse entities that support a common cause. As such, solidarity awakens resistance but as it does so, it demands certain levels of conformity that weakens individuality while strengthening the collective solidarity of the group. Thus, solidarity by default, simultaneously risks creating unnecessary fissions between various groups of people and their memories, whether at the level of group of people or at the level of individual societies or even at the level of the individual. In this article, I explore the tensions that the concept of solidarity creates for feminism and, in a

broader sense, women. I argue that solidarity, which is a primarily positive force, creates a dialectic dilemma because it weakens the voices of what is considered marginal such as Arabian women voices, in order to strengthen the collective solidarity of women as a group.

## DISCUSSION

Solidarity has a strong impact on the formation of cultures and subcultures especially in this time of speedy

changes and ethnic struggles. Unfortunately feminist movements in different parts of the world, in the so-called 'third world', in particular, are coerced, in gender based solidarity movements, to adopt feminist models that are not indigenous to them. These models, which are often perceived as universal are actually models that are established by women in USA and Western Europe and are universalized although they are imperatively bound by their history, culture and locale (McCormick 32-34).

This is especially true in the case of women and feminism in, the so-called, underdeveloped countries. The society, in order to solve the problems of women in it, are presented with feminist models that come mainly from USA and Western Europe; and they are coerced into accepting these models as 'the ideal'. However, these models do not take into consideration the specificity of 'other' women's conditions and because they are imported as 'finalized' models that are not open for the classic process of reshaping and evolution. Within this frame some individual aspects are not enabled to have a voice so other aspects would be because too many voices may create an incomprehensible buzz that has the potential to blur the overall message.

Many women, in less materially developed parts of the world, like Arabia, may perceive these models as the norm or 'the' model because their voices attain supremacy within their own social groups, because western women are the initiators of modern women's struggle, and because they are members of a most powerful culture in the world currently. However, we can safely say that the models western women developed and the historic evolution of their struggle signify specific socio-cultural and historical circumstance and that white western feminism went through many stages according to its cotemporary cultural conditions at the time.

At home, white western women theories are open to interpretations, modification, and evolution. However, when transported, they are treated as hard judgmental blocks. Abroad, physically and metaphorically, the theories and practices of women's movements become closed and finalized models that are not open to deconstruction and reshaping. Sometimes, they are imposed on societies by its elites regardless of their suitability (Bromley 13-15; Vertovec 4-6).

In turn indigenous women and their models become stunted and unable to address the specific problems of women in a particular social context. Following is an example of imposing a foreign feminist agenda. The issue of equal pay was an important aspect of feminist struggles in USA yet it was never a problem for women in Saudi Arabia; women in Saudi Arabia automatically received equal pay from day one on the job. This is not to say that they do not have any problems but to say that they have a different set of problems than that of women in USA or UK. However when feminist or women in Saudi Arabia adopt a USA model local issues become blurred and the local agenda may be considered

unimportant or, at least, less important than the imported USA agenda.

In a similar vent, last year Saudi and western newspapers were awash with news that Saudi women would work as cashiers. Although I am not against the job, it irked me that this issue became so paramount because I knew in the that women worked in Arabia since olden times when they needed to and I have personally seen women selling in special shifting shops in the southern region of Saudi Arabia when they needed to. The glorification of women's cashier jobs was not comprehensible to most Saudi women who do have an understanding of western feminist agenda. This opportunity was more of a token because the number of available positions was very small a very limited number of Saudi women were financially helped within this scheme. Consequently, there was more excitement about this issue among non-native women than among local women.

Both issues did not gain the support or the enthusiasm of most Saudi women because they did not want to fight for what they perceived as either a non issue like equal pay or an inglorious and limited opportunity like the cashier jobs. Furthermore, most did not wish to be part of the glorification that would only lend an opportunity to very few women.

Another problem with imposing a foreign feminist agenda is less obvious because it has to do with feminist processes rather than outcomes. When processes are questioned, other women keep hearing that it took certain steps and time to achieve certain goals for western women and it is assumed that the same goals exist and that similar processes and time spans will be required to reach them. This strikes me along with many women from my culture, as presumptuous and racist because such attitudes grants western women full agency while it denies self-identification to local women. As such, solidarity becomes a barrier against self-fulfillment rather than a catalyst for progress.

Furthermore, women, in general lose the opportunity of being informed and enriched by models and experiences of other women groups such as Arabian women that can provide fresh feminist readings and new feminist models to women and feminism elsewhere. Sometimes this occurs because of pre-inscribed prejudices that occur even with resistant writings. For example, Reina Lewis in *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* uses a classic Orientalist picture of a reclining bejeweled oriental woman while her book contests classic thought against Muslim women (Eagleton, 1996; Elmessiri, 2002; Hooks, 1992; Khader, 2012; Lewis, 1996; McCormick et al, 1987; Vertovec, 2009; Victoria, 2012; Yeguenoglu, 1998; Wa Thiong'o, 1994). When a national confrontation happens, prejudices are usually unearthed and they are used in the nationalistic struggles. Jamil Khader comments on such contradictory tendencies by stating that 'third world' women are represented "as an Other [sic] in western

academic discourses and popular culture through typical Orientalist tropes" (Elmessiri, 2002).

This deems it necessary to pose a few questions. Do "universal" struggles exist? What happens to people in the absence of their indigenous memories? What is the role of memory in initiating and shaping solidarity? Does solidarity impose and/or forge new memories? What happens to older memories? To what extent can newly forged memories replace older memories? How does all of this affect the way feminism operates in a culture and how do white western women position themselves in relation to other women? Finally, in a world plagued by war and continuous racist struggle, what takes precedent in times of struggle?

In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," Bell Hooks suggests that feministic should maintain a policy of "*partiality*" rather than a policy of "inclusion" and argues that feminists should not impose attempts to universalize women's conditions because such an attitude implies that white western women hold the right to speak for women from other cultures, who are presumed to be oppressed. She explains that many other women have other interests and they support issues that may not be compatible with gender issues. Hooks explains that issues, such as the slavery of black people in USA is much more important and urgent to black women in USA than what white women deem necessary.

Hooks brings forth the question of what takes precedent: gender or race. The assumption that categories can be clearly delineated is incorrect because at different historical moments and indifferent locales categories tend to overlap resulting in struggles of various intensities between various entities. Hooks argues that the sometimes pronounced, sometimes embedded assumption that women of different groups or cultures have the same interests, struggles or frame of reference as that of western feminists is not accurate.

She suggests that instead of authorizing the 'other' woman form within a specific agenda, women's narratives need not be analysed from an all-inclusive gender stand (115-130). She maintains that white Western feminisms risk becoming a dominating power if such an issue is overlooked and further argues that "power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control" (115).

Not only black or 'third world women' struggle with issues of gender and race. White western women as members of both colonized and colonizing groups also do. At home, white western women face gender positioning imposed on them, as 'secondary' in a physically and conceptually male world. However, in the lack of apparently threatening situation, women do not have to show patriotic ethos. Abroad conceptually and physically but especially physically, racist and nationalist tendencies arise. Women may align themselves with the

colonial powers in order to thrive or even to survive. Even resisting women can be re-authorized and re-appropriated by the imperial dominant. In reward, they are usually granted the status of 'honorary men' as members of the dominating group.

The solidarity dilemma can be negotiated by rereading literary writers and texts and by locating intersections between the different readings. In order to do that we must not only consider what is directly verbalized but what is omitted and silenced as well. The French theorist, Pierre Macherey, says in "The Text Says What it Does not Say" that it is very important for reading to examine not only what is declared but also "to ask of every production what it tacitly implies; what it does not say" (Macherey 217). Partiality can be approached by reading texts at their multiple levels of operation to unravel the various subtleties embedded in the narratives and to investigate the relationships between these subtleties to locate their overriding representations.

Prioritizing the colonial or the colonizing situates agency to be against the Selfis a self-destructing aspect of the dilemma of solidarity. Various writers suggest different solutions for the dilemma. Mary Eagleton suggests to "sideline gender" (Eagleton7) and argues against "concentrating on gender oppression" and demands, like hooks, that "white western feminist theory needs to confront its implicit racism and racial stereotyping" (Khader, 2012; Lewis, 1996). The Kenyan critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls for examining the real forces at play between imperialism and resistance (Macherey, 1990). Meyda Yogenoglu suggests avoiding evasion to side-step the perpetuation of colonial latency. Abdulwahab Elmessiri suggests a structural solution. He suggests that instead of conducting analyses on the base of objective-subjective models, we can employ 'compound interpretive models' that are less judgmental and that provide a wider capacity of interpretation. I suggest that the dialectic dilemma of solidarity can be resolved by rooting solidarity in local collective memories rather than by negating them.

## CONCLUSION

Solidarity has the potential to revive and also negate memory; as it unites and strengthens, it weakens. On the one hand, solidarity unites people from different places and walks of life and uncovers collective memories but it goes beyond the local so one is not trapped in the amnesia created sometimes by the control of memory. Furthermore, it strengthens various creative groups by networking them with others who have the same interests. On the other hand, it sometimes diminishes identification with one's own collective memory, which constitutes her/ his roots, thus exposing a society or certain groups in it for disintegrating certain

memories and groups while enabling the more powerful wins. Solidarity with women, as a category, generates similar conditions. Adopting feminist models from powerful cultures creates a willful amnesia by certain feminists in a society like the Arabian society, and an imposition of the voice of women whose culture represents the mainstream at the expense of those whose culture is marginalized. I argue that Arab women should develop their own feminism and that they should be enabled to draw on their collective socio-cultural and individual memories along with Islamic traditions that are partly memory and partly a way to understand and regulate life and relationships between people. Both should be explored to create a form of feminism that responds to the need of Arab Muslim women, rather than import a closed form of feminism that is primarily owned and operated by the rich and powerful social elite of Arabia. Furthermore, it is important that feminists investigate new ways and models to deal with the complicated gender and race tensions that are constantly negotiated in women's narratives.

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