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On the Liberation of All Women: Socialist Feminism and Materialist Ecofeminism

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Abstract

Feminists of the Western world claim to be striving for the liberation of all women, yet face a number of challenges in the pursuit of truly acting upon this objective. One of these challenges is the way in which western structures, such as capitalism, thrive off of the exploitation of women in developing countries. Other related challenges include the unintentional belittling of the cultures and feminist movements of developing countries through cultural imperialism and culture-blaming. In this paper, I argue that the only version of feminism that truly works for the liberation of all women is socialist feminism. Furthermore, this must be a version of socialist feminism that allows for feminists to approach the dismantling of capitalism in whatever way is most feasible and effective for them to do as such. In this paper, I focus specifically on the way that materialist ecofeminism in developing countries is a necessary component to the global dismantling of capitalism.

On the Liberation of All Women: Socialist Feminism and Materialist Ecofeminism

Feminism is a movement intended to work for the liberation of all women. While feminists in western nations claim to be committed to this, often their efforts to help resolve feminist issues on a global scale are more problematic than helpful. This is due to the tendency of western feminists to engage in both the practices of cultural imperialism (the imposing of western standards onto women in developing countries) and ethnocentrism, especially when it comes to feminist issues in developing countries. To effectively work to improve the situation of women in developing countries, western feminists must both cease to commit such harmful practices by learning about global feminist issues within the context of their respective cultures, and subscribe to a version of feminism that is critical of western structures that hinder the development of women.

The most harmful of the aforementioned western structures are capitalism and neo-liberal globalization, as they largely flourish off of the exploitation of poor women in developing countries. Thus, in order to truly be committed to the liberation of all women, western feminists must be committed to a version of feminism, like socialist feminism, that seeks to dismantle global capitalism. Furthermore, western feminists must support and trust the insight and power of the women who are being affected. Women in developing countries, particularly poor women, are already working to fight against capitalism through feminist movements of their own that work within their respective cultures, specifically in many cultures through ecofeminism.

The implications of the practice of cultural imperialism are detailed by Uma Narayan in her paper "Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and 'Death by Culture.'" Narayan (2006) notes that there is a tendency in western feminism to assume that what is the right resolution to feminist issues in the West will also be the right resolution to feminist issues elsewhere. In her paper, she focuses specifically on the issue of dowry-murder, a form of domestic violence, in India. One widespread response from western feminists to the issue of dowry murder has been to wonder why the organization of battered women's shelters is not as high on the Indian feminist agenda as it is in the United States. Western feminists would explain this lack of battered women's shelters as proof that "not to have such homes is to be at a lower stage of development in the struggle against violence on women" (p. 65). In other words, it is an assumption that because the two movements

are not addressing the issues in the same way, the feminist movement in India is not as sophisticated or effective as the feminist movement in the West. However, Narayan explains that battered women's shelters are simply not culturally, socially, or economically feasible in India. Resources that would allow women to leave their homes and seek refuge at battered women's shelters include state-provided welfare, education, medical care, and legal services to deal with custody, which are simply not as readily available in India as they are in nations in the West. In addition, there are high levels of unemployment, "stigma on women living ... and moving around on their own," and class stratifications in India that are stricter than most places in the West that do not find certain "avenues of employment" to be permissible. (Narayan, 2006, p. 66)

The cultural imperialism present in this example operates on the false assumption that cultures in developing countries are inherently less developed and more oppressive than cultures in the West. Another issue that stems from this assumption is western ethnocentrism, which Narayan also addresses within the context of dowry-murder. Dowry-murder, which is most often performed by burning a woman to death, has been attempted to be explained by connecting the practice to allusions to fire in Hindu culture. This includes the use of fire in many Hindu ceremonies, a mythological story where a woman throws herself into a fire to prove her chastity to her husband, and the former Hindu practice of sati, where widows throw themselves into their husband's funeral pyres. She explains that this logic is problematic on the grounds that dowry-murder simply has nothing to do with any of these things, and that attempts of this sort inherently seek to justify the belief that Indian culture is inferior to western cultures. She states that, "While the institution of dowry can certainly be meaningfully connected to 'Indian culture' it is not, I think, given a satisfactory 'explanation' by references to 'religion'" (Narayan, 2006, p. 73). She then provides the reader with a thought experiment to show how the same connections could be drawn between American domestic violence and the importance of guns to American culture and shows how this example is equally ridiculous. This reveals the patronizing nature of the way that the West views the cultures of developing countries. Instead of viewing issues the way we would in our own nations, like the equally problematic issue of domestic violence in America, westerners often try to find ways to isolate these issues from their parallels in other cultures so as to be able to blame the culture itself.

Alison Jaggar (2005), in her paper, "'Saving Amina': Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue," alludes to the problem of culture blaming when she says:

The poverty and associated abuses suffered by poor women in poor countries, however, cannot be understood exclusively in terms of unjust local traditions. To understand such poverty and abuse more fully, it is also necessary to situate these traditions in a border geopolitical and geoeconomic context. (p. 8)

Her argument here is that it is easy to be ethnocentric, but it is impossible to get an accurate understanding of the situation of a country by looking at it as an isolate because no countries are isolates. What she is specifically referring to here is the way that neo-liberal globalization, a product of the West, affects women in developing countries. She notes that the increase in globalization has intensified difficulties for poor women in particular. It has led to the loss of livelihoods, the loss of labor rights, and the decline of small-scale and subsistence agriculture to such a degree that many women have been driven off of their land. In this way, trying to examine the ways in which women are oppressed in developing countries without taking external forces like these into account will always leave one with an incomplete and incorrect view of the picture.

To continue with her point that it is impossible to examine a culture independent of others, Jaggar (2005) asserts that it is equally impossible to "contrast whole cultures with each other" (p.14). Again, this is due to the way that no countries or cultures are independent of all others in such a way that would make this kind of stark contrast possible. She points out again that this is largely due to the effects of neo-liberal globalization, which has dramatically increased interactions between many western and non-western nations. Despite this, the practice of wrongly judging cultures

independently of each other still persists and creates harmful false ideologies about the relationships between these cultures. These ideologies include the idea that the West is “dynamic, progressive, and egalitarian,” while non-Western cultures are “backward, barbaric, and patriarchal.” Neo-liberal globalization is something that runs quietly in the background of western life, mainly in the form of consumerism. It is not often that westerners are prompted to question this system, or to seek an understanding of how it affects the lives of people in other parts of the world. Based on this lack of understanding of the practices and beliefs of developing countries and how those of the western world affect them, the narrative that what is western is ideal is able to persist. Through culture blaming, the West can assume that the feminist issues in non-western cultures are completely of those countries’ own design- that “discrimination and violence against women [are] intrinsic parts of non-western but not of western cultures” (Jaggar, 2005, p. 14). This ideology allows the exploitative nature of neo-liberal globalization to be quietly swept under the rug- ignoring the reality that it “[relies] on the labor of a new transnational labor force that is feminized, racialized, and sexualized” (Jaggar, 2005, p. 13).

In the case of responding to dowry-murder as mentioned in Narayan’s paper, the ability of western feminists to believe they know what is best for Indian women rests on a complete lack of understanding of Indian culture and social structure. It also reflects an unwillingness to recognize that Indian culture and social structure are in fact legitimate and not inferior to those of western nations. Jaggar’s paper highlights the hypocrisy of the western world in the way that it tries to impose its ethical standards on other nations while systematically contributing to and benefitting from the oppression of their people due to its role in neo-liberal globalization. In virtue of this, for the West to assume that its standards are the ideal is simply to beg the question. It is the western world that is entirely built upon capitalism and thus upon the exploitation of people, especially women, in developing countries. This leaves the West in no position to tell feminists in developing countries how they should respond to the issues they face, since the West in fact has incentive to not realize how its role in the global economy hinders the liberation of millions of their women.

It can now be argued that a version of feminism that supports neoliberal globalization is not a sufficient version of feminism. The liberation of all women is simply impossible when their exploitation is necessary for the flourishing of the capitalist agenda. What is needed is a version of feminism that is inclusive of all women in all situations, and this entails a version of feminism that is committed to dismantling capitalism. This will take on different forms in the West and in developing countries, due to differences in material conditions in each of those places. I will first address what form this will take on in western countries: socialist feminism.

Nellie Wong (1997), in her paper “Socialist Feminism: Our Bridge to Freedom,” explains why socialist feminism is the only way to achieve holistic liberation. She supports her claim on the grounds that capitalism, by nature, organizes power and wealth so that the exploitation of the many ensures the accumulation of wealth by the few. By nature, socialism aims to redistribute this power and wealth away from the few, and feminism calls for the liberation of those who are exploited and oppressed under the patriarchy, i.e., women. Wong explicitly draws a link between these two sources of oppression by going on to say that “Revolutionary Trotskyist feminism sees the most oppressed sections of the working class as decisive to revolution- working women and particularly working women of color” (p. 209). By virtue of the fact that the most exploited are called to revolt against the capitalist system, and the most exploited both by the patriarchy and by capitalism are women, a version of feminism that is grounded in socialism is the only way to address the full scope of oppression that women in today's world face.

In Wong’s (1997) paper, she recounts the personal journey that led her to the development of a socialist feminist consciousness. This journey included the realization that the grievances she had about being a working woman of color in America were not unique to her and her situation- they were on par with those of “other women, other Asian Americans, other people of color, other

feminists, and other workers” (p. 209). It was not by chance that after over eighteen years of secretarial work for the second-largest steel producing company in the United States Wong was then laid off. While at university, she realized that what happened to her was a product of systematic oppression: a product of racism, sexism, and the reality that in the “capitalist bourgeois society” she lived in, her work was only valuable by how much it could contribute to the continuation of the “[provision] of wealth to the few” (p. 209). Her narrative provides evidence that capitalism is not only exploitative of women in developing countries who provide the raw material and labor that make capitalism possible, but is also exploitative of women in the United States and other western nations. This is further evidence that instances of western cultures claiming to not be inherently discriminatory, sexist, and exploitative in the way that they claim non-western cultures to be are completely fallacious.

“Socialist Feminism: Our Bridge to Freedom” (1997) focuses mainly on the ways that working women in the West can resist capitalism. In the western world this would be a revolution of women and people of color, as they are the populations that comprise the exploited working class. This sort of revolution would be possible due to the material conditions that most feminists and exploited women in the West exist under. The working class in western society, while not in possession of as much wealth or power as the few whom their work benefits, still has significantly more wealth and power within their societies than poor women in developing countries do. However, to say that the socialist feminist efforts of the West would be sufficient alone to dismantle capitalism would fail to recognize the importance of the role of feminist efforts in other parts of the world, specifically in developing countries, to the socialist feminist agenda. While Wong acknowledges that a socialist feminist revolution will only be effective if it is worldwide, she fails to detail both what this kind of action would look like in other parts of the world, and just how necessary that action truly is to the project.

Women in developing countries do indeed have a vital role to play in the dismantling of capitalism, but by virtue of the different relationship that women in developing countries have to capitalism in comparison to the relationship that western women have to capitalism, their resistance must look different. It must cater to their situations and their immediate needs and resources, in addition to contributing to the overall anti-capitalist project. Poor women in developing countries do not necessarily have access to the kind of education that would allow them to develop the same kind of feminist consciousness that Wong did when she began at college, nor the resources to make explicit the connection between feminism, capitalism, and the need for socialist feminism. To assume this of poor women in developing countries would be to perpetuate cultural imperialism by both assuming that the only legitimate forms of resistance are the forms of resistance that the West would perform, and overlooking the forms of feminist resistance efforts that they are already making. It would be to say, yet again, that only western feminists know what is best for women in developing countries.

In the essay “Globalization and ecofeminism in the South: Keeping the ‘Third World’ alive,” Pandey (2013) details the ways in which feminists in the Global South use materialist ecofeminism to resist against the forces of capitalism. What materialist ecofeminism does is “[show] that feminist social justice cannot be achieved without addressing environmental issues in the South” by “[focusing] on capitalist patriarchy, highlighting the devastating impact of capitalist structures on nature and, as it follows, the lives and livelihoods of poor women across the planet” (Pandey, 2013, p. 347). Materialist ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of the relationship that women in developing countries have with nature due to their large dependence on it for their lives and livelihoods. This relationship is an avenue through which women are able to protect their lands and “show exactly how globalization impacts them through environmental degradation and usurping resources that are rightfully theirs” (Pandey, 2013, p. 349). Examples of ecofeminist resistance can be found all throughout developing countries.

One example of materialist ecofeminist resistance that Pandey highlights is a movement called “Maiti,” which is practiced by Garhwali women in India. These women traditionally and historically have extremely close ties with the forests that they live in. However, their forests are becoming increasingly threatened by forest fires, illegal logging, and encroachments. To respond to this, the Garhwali women have taken the lead in the conservation and preservation of their trees. Maiti involves unmarried girls taking on the responsibility of planting trees and tending to them until the day they are married, where the trees are then blessed by the same priest who performs the marriage rites. The families of the young women are then asked to take care of the trees, as if the trees were their daughters themselves. This practice is currently performed by up to 6,000 villages in the state of Garhwal and has meant incredible levels of afforestation for this region of India.

Another driving force behind the movement of ecofeminism, both materialist and not, is to “emphasize the need to reevaluate women’s roles, responsibilities, tasks, and all that is associated with the feminine, pay due respect to nature and develop a non-exploitative attitude toward the Third World as a genuine alternative to the current model of neo-globalization” (Pandey, 1997, p. 350). This point is made on the basis that neo-liberal globalization is a work of the patriarchy. It mainly benefits the white, rich, elite males of the first world and systematically devalues the worth and work of women by the way that it operates. It is women who “play the larger role in agriculture, animal husbandry, [and] provision of fodder and soil rejuvenation in Third World countries” (Pandey, 1997, p. 350). It is those women who are put out of work and out of home when land in developing nations is lost to industrial agriculture and other products of neo-liberal globalization. By protecting the land that they have subsisted off of for generations from the exploitation of globalization (and all of the patriarchal values that it embodies), they are fighting for their work to be recognized as important and legitimate.

Materialist ecofeminism is a necessary component of socialist feminism. Feminism is not an effective movement if it does not reach all women, value all of their feminist efforts, and take into account the way that women in different cultures are affected by and respond to feminist issues differently. In order to create this sort of unified feminist agenda, feminism must be a project that supports the liberation of all women in the way that socialist feminism does, and must also intentionally leave room for women in different situations to resist in whatever ways are feasible for them. This will require western feminists to learn about the different global feminist movements, recognize that these different responses to feminist issues are both valid and imperative to the fight, and support them and their efforts. Not doing so would only perpetuate the harmful effects of culture-blaming and cultural imperialism by keeping global feminist efforts isolated from one another. This feminism relies on an element of inclusivity. Without it, the efforts of the movement will only work to undermine their own purpose and socialist feminism will be unable to take root on a global scale.

To look at the issue specifically from the perspective of challenging neo-liberal globalization, socialist feminism and materialist ecofeminism effectively work together to fight the issue from both ends in a way that could not be achieved by one or the other alone. “Both ends” refers to both the policies and structures that hold capitalism and neo-liberal globalization in place and the raw material conditions that allow for it to work. Wong (1997) emphasizes that “socialism cannot exist within a single country but must be a worldwide system, supplanting world capitalism” (p. 210). Materialist ecofeminism inherently works to support the socialist agenda by aiming to counteract the environmentally destructive forces of neo-liberal globalization in developing countries. Efforts associated with materialist ecofeminism center around the preservation and restoration of resources that are usurped from developing countries for the benefit of capitalism. This is a site of resistance that is necessary to the global eradication of capitalism, seeing that the capitalist societies that exist in the West rely so heavily on labor and land from developing countries. The version of socialist feminism that is utilized by the West would not receive uptake in those parts of the world in quite the same way that materialist ecofeminism does. This is due to the fact that capitalism and

neo-liberal globalization affect different areas of the world differently and are integrated into the cultures of those areas differently as well. If developing countries are mainly affected by the ways in which their resources and labor are exploited, then it is through resistance to those things that must be used to fight back. This goes back to the principle of understanding the cultural contexts of different feminist movements. What works in the West will not work everywhere, and acknowledging this to allow socialist feminism and materialist ecofeminism to work together will create the most effective and unified resistance to capitalism.

The last reason why socialist feminism and materialist ecofeminism must work in conjunction with one another is because materialist ecofeminism provides a necessary piece of the feminist puzzle that is missing from socialist feminism. Again, Wong notes that the aim of socialist feminism is to create a global system of socialism. Socialist feminism alone will work just fine to redistribute the wealth and power among people in the First World, but to create a true global socialist system that lacks class hierarchies requires the intentional reevaluation of the work that women do all over the world. In the West, women tend to have much more privilege than women in developing countries, especially with regard to the level of education they are able to receive and thus the kinds of jobs they are able to obtain. Largely, it is in areas like developing countries where the division of labor between men and women is the starkest and the most socially stratified. Women in developing countries perform most of the agricultural labor and other duties that involve interaction with nature. This is the kind of work that is undermined by neo-liberal globalization, due to the way that it exploits resources and thus undermines the livelihoods that women create by working with these resources. Jaggar (2005) points out that, "The decline of small-scale and subsistence agriculture has driven many women off the land and into the shantytowns that encircle most major cities in developing countries," and that "neo-liberal globalization has also destroyed many traditional industries on which poor women in poor countries once depended" (pp. 9-10).

The work of women and the resources that make neo-liberal globalization possible are inseparable. Thus, the need to revalue the work of women is essential to the goals of socialist feminism. Dismantling capitalism inherently calls for the revaluation of the resources that are used to sustain it, and in this inherently calls for the revaluation of the work that goes into tending toward these resources. Intentionally giving more value to women's work in developing countries is a necessary part of creating an entire world in which there are no economic hierarchies, and the goals of materialist ecofeminism address this reevaluation of women's work in a way that socialist feminism on its own does not. Thus, ecofeminism proves itself to be an imperative part of the accomplishment of the socialist feminist agenda.

Responding to global feminist issues in the most effective way is a project wrought with difficulty. It is a challenge to ensure that the feminist efforts being put forth are truly what will be best for all women, since all of the women in the world are socially and culturally situated so differently. True liberation for all women will not be achieved without the eradication of capitalism. With the intention in mind to avoid practicing cultural imperialism or culture-blaming, it is clear that the issue will have to be combatted in different ways to allow for the most cohesive change to occur. Socialist feminism and materialist ecofeminism are the two forms of feminism that address this need to challenge capitalism while leaving room for the cultural and social differences of women all over the world to be accounted for.

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