

## Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism

UMA NARAYAN

*Drawing parallels between gender essentialism and cultural essentialism, I point to some common features of essentialist pictures of culture. I argue that cultural essentialism is detrimental to feminist agendas and suggest strategies for its avoidance. Contending that some forms of cultural relativism buy into essentialist notions of culture, I argue that postcolonial feminists need to be cautious about essentialist contrasts between "Western" and "Third World" cultures.*

---

In recent decades, feminists have stressed the need to think about issues of gender in conjunction with, and not in isolation from, issues of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and have forcefully illustrated that differences among women must be understood and theorized in order to avoid essentialist generalizations about "women's problems" (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1981; Lugones and Spelman 1983). The feminist critique of gender essentialism does not merely charge that essentialist claims about "women" are over-generalizations, but points out that these generalizations are hegemonic in that they represent the problems of privileged women (most often white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual women) as paradigmatic "women's issues."

Such essentialist generalizations result in theoretical perspectives and political agendas that efface the problems, perspectives, and political concerns of many women who are marginalized in terms of their class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For instance, analyses that trace women's subordination to their confinement to domestic roles and the private sphere can constitute problematic essentialist generalizations if they ignore that the links between femininity and the private sphere are not trans-historical but have arisen in particular historical contexts. Thus, while the ideology of domesticity may have immured many middle-class women in the home, it also sanctioned the

*Hypatia* vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring 1998) © by Uma Narayan

economic exploitation of women slaves and working-class women, whose most pressing problems did not result from their confinement to the private sphere.

In fora committed to the development of transnational and global feminist perspectives, feminists have often specifically reiterated the need to take account of national and cultural differences among women, in order to avoid essentializing analyses that pay inadequate attention to the concerns of women in Third World contexts. I am sympathetic to such feminist criticisms of gender essentialism and to the claim that feminist theories and political agendas need to be responsive to the diversity of women's lives, both within and across national contexts. However, I believe that this feminist injunction to attend to "differences among women" sometimes takes questionable forms. I will argue that feminist efforts to avoid gender essentialism sometimes result in pictures of cultural differences among women that constitute what I shall call "cultural essentialism." In the first section of this paper, I will describe some problematic similarities between "gender essentialism" and "cultural essentialism" and will try to uncover some reasons why analyses that try to avoid "gender essentialism" might end up subscribing to "cultural essentialism." In the second section, I will describe some important features of essentialist pictures of "cultures" and suggest some moves that facilitate feminist challenges to such pictures. In the third section, I will critically engage versions of cultural essentialism that arise from progressive segments of the political spectrum. In the fourth and final section, I will explore the implications of my critique of cultural essentialism for issues of cultural relativism. Throughout the essay, my goal is to argue that essentialist notions of "culture" pose particular problems for Third World feminist agendas.

#### GENDER ESSENTIALISM AND CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM

One important instance in which the injunction to attend to differences among women can lead to problems is when this project is carried out in a manner that avoids essentialism about women by replicating essentialist notions of "cultural differences" between "Western" and "Non-western" cultures. The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between "Western culture" and "Non-western cultures" and the women who inhabit them. 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.

Although often motivated by the injunction to take differences among women seriously, such moves fracture the universalist category "Woman" only slightly, because culture-specific essentialist generalizations differ from uni-

versalistic essentialist generalizations only in degree or scope, and not in kind. The resulting portraits of "Western women," "Third World women," "African women," "Indian women," "Muslim women," or the like, as well as the pictures of the "cultures" that are attributed to these various groups of women, often remain fundamentally essentialist. They depict as homogenous groups of heterogeneous people whose values, interests, ways of life, and moral and political commitments are internally plural and divergent. Numerous examples of such generalizations are criticized by Chandra Mohanty, who points out that each of the texts she analyzes

assumes "women" have a coherent group identity within the different cultures discussed, prior to their entry into social relations. Thus, Omvedt can talk about "Indian women" while referring to a particular group of women in the State of Maharashtra, Cutrufelli about "women of Africa," and Minces about "Arab women," as if these groups of women have some sort of obvious cultural coherence. (Mohanty 1991, 70)

There are a number of similarities between gender essentialism and cultural essentialism. While gender essentialism often proceeds to assume and construct sharp binaries about the qualities, abilities, or locations of "men" and "women," cultural essentialism assumes and constructs sharp binaries between "Western culture" and "Non-western cultures" or between "Western culture" and particular "Other" cultures. In both cases, the discursive reiteration of such "essential differences" operates in a manner that helps construct the senses of gender identity and of cultural identity that shape the self-understandings and subjectivities of different groups of people who inhabit these discursive contexts. With both gender essentialism and cultural essentialism, discourses about "difference" often operate to conceal their role in the production and reproduction of such "differences," presenting these differences as something pre-given and prediscursively "real" that the discourses of difference merely describe rather than help construct and perpetuate.

While gender essentialism often conflates socially dominant norms of femininity with the problems, interests and locations of actual particular women, cultural essentialism often conflates socially dominant cultural norms with the actual values and practices of a culture. While gender essentialism often equates the problems, interests and locations of some socially dominant groups of men and women with those of "all men" and "all women," cultural essentialism often equates the values, worldviews, and practices of some socially dominant groups with those of "all members of the culture." For instance, Mary Daly's chapter on "Indian Sutte" (1978) reproduces an essentialist picture of "Indian culture" both by ignoring that *sati* was not a practice ever engaged in by "All Indians" and by effacing the history of criticisms and challenges posed to this practice by various groups of Indians (Narayan, 1997).

Given the similarities between cultural essentialism and gender essentialism, it is interesting to encounter culturally essentialist generalizations being generated as a result of self-conscious feminist attempts to avoid gender essentialism, something that happens not infrequently in classrooms and conferences, as well as in academic texts. Why is it that attempts to avoid gender essentialism sometimes generate rather than deter cultural essentialism? I believe that part of the explanation lies in the prevalence of an incomplete understanding of the relationship between "gender essentialism" and "cultural imperialism." The gender essentialism perpetuated by relatively privileged subjects, including Western feminists, is understood to be a form of "cultural imperialism," whereby privileged subjects tend to construct their "cultural Others" in their own image, taking their particular locations and problems to be those of "All Women." This account ignores the degree to which cultural imperialism often proceeds by means of an "insistence on Difference," by a projection of Imaginary "differences" that constitute one's Others as Other, rather than via an "insistence on Sameness." Failing to see that "cultural imperialism" can involve both sorts of problems, attempts to avoid the Scylla of "Sameness" often result in moves that leave one foundering on the Charybdis of "Difference."

Reducing "cultural imperialism" to the problem of "the imposition of Sameness" conceals the importance of the role that sharply-contrasting essentialist pictures of "cultural differences" between "Western culture" and its various "Others" played during colonial times, both in various justifications for colonial rule and in the scripts of various nationalist movements that challenged and sought to overthrow colonialism, pictures that resurface in postcolonial attempts at engaging with issues of cultural difference. A postcolonial feminist perspective that strives to be attentive to differences among women without replicating such essentialist notions of cultural differences needs to acknowledge the degree to which the colonial encounter depended on an "insistence on Difference"; on sharp, virtually absolute, contrasts between "Western culture" and "Other cultures." After all, Kipling's lines "Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling 1944, 233) were written at a historical moment when East and West were engaged in a seriously protracted encounter.

This frequently reiterated contrast between "Western" and "Non-western" cultures was a politically motivated colonial construction. The self-proclaimed "superiority" of "Western culture" functioned as the rationale and mandate for colonialism. The colonial self-portrait of "Western culture" had, however, only a faint resemblance to the moral, political, and cultural values that *actually pervaded* life in Western societies. Thus liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic "Western values," hallmarks of its civilizational superiority, at the very moment when Western nations were engaged in slavery,

colonization, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of Western subjects, including women. Profound *similarities* between Western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women, were systematically ignored in this construction of "Western culture."

The colonial picture of the sharp contrasts between "Western culture" and its Others also resulted in seriously distorted representations of various "colonized cultures," often as a result of the prejudiced and ideologically motivated stereotypes held by Western colonizers but *also* as a result of anti-colonial nationalist movements embracing and trying to revalue the imputed facets of their own "culture" embedded in these stereotypes. Thus, while the British imputed "spiritualism" to Indian culture to suggest lack of readiness for the this-worldly project of self-rule, many Indian nationalists embraced this definition in order to make the anticolonialist and nationalist argument that "our culture" was both distinctive from and superior to "Western culture." As a result of this colonial process, sharply contrastive essentialist pictures of "Western culture" and of various colonized "national cultures" were reiterated by both colonizers and the colonized, both of whom failed to register the degree to which their very constitution as "Western" or "Non-western" subjects resulted from these putative contrasts between "cultures."

Given that many Third World countries are still subject to economic domination and political intrusion and control by Western powers in postcolonial times, political resistance to such domination and intrusion from a variety of points in the political spectrum is often articulated in terms that replicate problematically essentialist notions of "Western culture" and particular "Third World cultures." Both Western and Third World feminists who often have legitimate worries about Western imperialism and valid concerns that feminist agendas pay attention to differences among women sometimes unfortunately tend to articulate these concerns in ways that replicate rather than challenge these essentialist notions of "Western culture" and "Third World cultures."

While culturally essentialist feminist representations of "Third World cultures" sometimes depict the practices and values of *privileged* groups as those of the "culture as a whole" (as Daly does in her discussion of *sati*), equally essentialist representations are produced when the "Representative Third World Woman" is modeled on *marginalized and underprivileged* Third World women. The latter sort of representation effaces Third World heterogeneity as effectively as the former, and bears the marks of a curious asymmetry, in that the most underprivileged of Western women are seldom cast as "Representative of Western Culture." Chandra Mohanty accounts for this asymmetry

when she points to how several Western feminist texts work to produce the image of an "average third world woman."

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty 1991, 56)

Cultural essentialism often poses a pressing problem for feminist agendas in Third World contexts, given that essentialist constructions of particular Third World "cultures" often play a powerful ongoing role in political movements that are inimical to women's interests in various parts of the Third World. These essentialist portraits of culture often depict culturally dominant norms of femininity, and practices that adversely affect women, as central components of "cultural identity." They often equate women's conformity to the status quo with "the preservation of culture" and cast feminist challenges to norms and practices affecting women as "cultural betrayals." In such essentialist constructions of culture, norms and practices affecting the social status and roles of women are often represented as of central import to the task of "resisting westernization" and "preserving national culture," reducing Third World feminist contestations of local norms and practices pertaining to women as "betrayals of Nation and Culture." When essentialist definitions of Third World cultures are cloaked in the virtuous mantle of resistance to Western cultural imperialism, Third World feminists and others who contest prevailing norms and practices are discursively set up in the roles of "cultural traitors" and "stooges of Western imperialism." In addition, essentialist pictures of "national culture and traditions" often operate to justify the exploitation, domination, and marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities, and members of socially subordinate castes and the poor; and they are used to dismiss a variety of political demands for justice, equality, rights, or democracy as symptoms of the "cultural corruption" wrought by "Western ideas" (Mayer 1995, Howard 1993). These moves are often startlingly exemplified in the political rhetoric and maneuvers of many Third World fundamentalist and conservative political movements.

Given that essentialist definitions of culture are often deployed in ways that are detrimental to the interests of many members of the national community, including various groups of women, I would argue that feminists have a serious stake in challenging such definitions. Viable postcolonial feminist perspectives need to engage in rethinking the prevailing portraits of "Western culture" and of different Third World cultures, rather than assist-

ing in their replication and reification by conflating political resistance to Western domination and intrusion with essentialist notions of "cultural difference" and "cultural preservation."

#### CULTURALLY ESSENTIALIST MANEUVERS AND FEMINIST CHALLENGES

In the previous section, I attempted to call attention to similarities between cultural essentialism and gender essentialism, and to analyze why some feminist attempts to avoid gender essentialism result in replicating cultural essentialism. I have also argued that essentialist notions of culture pose particular dangers for Third World feminist agendas. In this section, I shall focus on Third World contexts and present some of the "moves" that are predominantly (but not exclusively) deployed by fundamentalists to replicate essentialist representations of culture that are detrimental to the interests of women. I shall also delineate some "counter-moves" that might facilitate Third World feminist challenges to such essentialist pictures of culture. In so doing, I hope to point to anti-essentialist ways of thinking about "cultural differences" that would, I believe, better serve the interests of a progressive postcolonial feminist perspective.

A useful general strategy for resisting cultural essentialism is the cultivation of a critical stance that "restores history and politics" to prevailing ahistorical pictures of "culture." Essentialist pictures of culture represent "cultures" as if they were natural givens, entities that existed neatly distinct and separate in the world, entirely independent of our projects of distinguishing between them. This picture tends to erase the reality that the "boundaries" between "cultures" are human constructs, underdetermined by existing variations in worldviews and ways of life; representations that are embedded in and deployed for a variety of political ends. Essentialist representations of culture eclipse the reality that the labels or designations that are currently used to demarcate or individuate particular "cultures" themselves have a historical provenance, and that what they individuate or pick out as "one culture" often changes over time.

Antiessentialist feminists can counter this static picture of culture by insisting on a historical understanding of the contexts in which what are currently taken to be "particular cultures" came to be seen and defined as such. For example, while a prevailing picture of "Western culture" has its beginning in ancient Greece and perhaps culminating in the contemporary United States, a historical perspective would register that the ancient Greeks did not define themselves as part of "Western culture," an appellation that seems to have arisen only with the advent of European colonialism, and that "American culture" was initially as likely to be distinguished from "European culture" as assimilated to it qua "Western culture." The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the term *Western* as used to refer to Europe in distinction to the

"Eastern" or "Oriental," begins around 1600, a testimony to its colonial origins. An antiessentialist perspective would also realize that many of the texts, artifacts, and practices ranging from ancient to modern times that are classified today as parts of "Indian culture" are "held together" by a label whose historical vintage is the British colonial period. This label is connected to the historical unification of an assortment of political territories into "British India," a union that enabled the nationalist challenge to colonialism to emerge as "Indian" and to stake its claim to self-government on the basis of a "national culture" (Narayan, 1995). Thus, an antiessentialist understanding of culture should emphasize that the labels that "pick out" particular "cultures" are not simple descriptions we employ to single out already distinct entities. Rather, they are fairly arbitrary and shifting designations, connected to various political projects that had different reasons for insisting upon the distinctiveness of one culture from another. Cultures are not pre-discursively individuated entities to which "names" are then bestowed as simple "labels," but entities whose individuation depends on complex discursive processes linked to political agendas.

Moreover, this historical sensibility also needs to be attentive to the historical and political processes by which particular values and practices have come to be imputed as *central* or *definitive* of a particular "culture." The "individuation" of a culture often proceeds precisely by casting certain values and practices as "constitutive and central elements" of the culture in order to distinguish it from "other cultures." Instead of seeing the centrality of particular values, traditions, or practices to any particular culture as *given*, we need to trace the historical and political processes by which these values, traditions, or practices have *come to be deemed* central constitutive components of a particular culture.

The feminist usefulness of both these moves is best illustrated by a concrete example. I will focus on the practice of *sati* (suttee), the immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands, which was constructed as a central component of "Indian culture" in colonial times, and is deployed in the political rhetoric of contemporary Hindu fundamentalists as an icon of the "Good Indian Woman," even as widow immolation has all but disappeared as a practice. An important question that feminists need to ask about *sati* is how and why this particular practice which is not engaged in by the vast majority of Hindu communities let alone all Indian ones, and which was the exceptional rather than routine fate of widows even in the few communities that practiced it, came to be regarded as a "Central Indian Tradition." The answer lies in complex nineteenth-century debates on the practice between British colonials and Indian elites that constituted *sati* as a "central and authentic Indian tradition," a process interestingly described in Lata Mani's "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on SATI in Colonial India" (1987). As a result of this debate, *sati* came to acquire, for both British and Indians, for its

supporters as well as opponents on both sides, an “emblematic status”—becoming a larger-than-life symbol of “Indian Culture” in a way that *radically transcended* the reality of its limited practice. Even for many Indian reformers opposed to the actual practice, *sati* became a lofty symbol of “ideal Indian womanhood,” indicating a feminine nobility and devotion to family deemed uncharacteristic of Western women.

This colonial history helps explain why *sati* has become a politically salient symbol of “Indian culture” available for deployment by Hindu fundamentalists today. However, this colonial history also operated in a manner that obscured and concealed its role in the *production* of *sati* as a “Central Indian Tradition.” It operated so as to “naturalize” *sati*’s status as a “core Indian tradition,” implying that this status was obvious and pre-given and that the discursive colonial contestation only *described and confirmed* its status rather than *created* it. What resulted was an uncritical acceptance of *sati* as an “Authentic Indian Tradition,” which could then only be evaluated as either a “Morally Valuable Good Tradition” or a “Morally Heinous Bad Tradition.” This situation threatens to foreclose political challenges to *sati*’s *very status* as a “Central Indian Tradition.” Feminists of Indian background have been among the few voices to help call into question *sati*’s *very status* as an “Indian tradition” by excavating the historical colonial context that “produced” this status (Mani 1987; Kumar 1994, Oldenberg 1994).

Ahistorical essentialist pictures of cultures also obscure the degree to which what is seen as constitutive of a particular “culture” and as central to projects of “cultural preservation” *changes over time*. Thus, essentialist notions of culture often rely on a picture that presents cultures not only as “givens” but as “unchanging givens.” Obscuring the reality of historical change and the political contestations with which it is entwined promotes a static and “fixed” picture of particular cultures, whereby their “values, practices, and traditions,” as well as their sense of what their culture amounts to and what its “preservation” entails, appear immune to history. I believe that a historically informed and antiessentialist feminist vision requires that we learn to see cultures as less rigid and more suffused by change than they are often depicted.

Many Third World feminist analyses are vitally useful in drawing attention to how dominant members of a culture often willingly change or discard what were previously regarded as “important cultural practices,” and willingly change or surrender various facets of such practices when it suits them, but resist and protest other cultural changes. The changes that are resisted tend to be changes that pose a threat to aspects of the dominant members’ social power, and are often changes pertaining to the status and welfare of women. For instance, Olayinka Koso-Thomas’s work reveals that in Sierra Leone, virtually all the elaborate initiation rites and training that were traditional preliminaries to female circumcision, and that lasted from one to two years,

have fallen by the wayside because people no longer have the time, money or social infrastructure for them. However, the practice of excision itself, abstracted from the whole context of practices in which it used to be embedded, is still seen as a crucial component of "preserving tradition," obscuring the degree to which other aspects of the tradition have been given up (Koso-Thomas 1987, 23). I believe that feminist contestations of what are designated as "traditional cultural practices" need to be alert to such *synecdochic moves* whereby "parts" of a practice come to stand in for a whole, because such substitutions invariably conceal various concrete social changes.

The synecdochic substitution that enables a radically changed cultural practice to masquerade as an "unchanging practice that is being culturally preserved" can also obscure relatively uncontested changes in "traditional practices" that have had substantial detrimental effects. For example, in the case of female circumcision in Sierra Leone, the disappearance of the initiation period seems to have modified the practice for the worse. The age at which excision is carried out has drastically decreased. It is now carried out on girl children rather than on teenagers, since girls no longer need to be old enough to learn the rituals and undergo the training which used to be constitutive facets of the practice (Koso-Thomas 1987, 23). Understanding and describing such facts of cultural change critically and politically is a crucial component of a feminist contestation of political agendas that rely on essentialist notions of "culture."

Feminist attention to such aspects of cultural change can help call attention to a general process that I call "selective labeling," whereby those with social power conveniently designate certain changes in values and practices as consonant with "cultural preservation" while designating other changes as "cultural loss" or "cultural betrayal" (Narayan, 1997). The deployment of "selective labeling" plays a powerful role in the facilitation of essentialist notions of culture because it allows changes that are approved by socially dominant groups to appear consonant with the preservation of essential values or core practices of a culture, while depicting changes that challenge the status quo as threats to "cultural preservation." Feminist attention to "selective labeling" can help underscore that those with social power often abandon or modify traditions when it suits them, and often do so in a manner that leaves these modifications unmarked as instances of "cultural change" and insulated from social debates about "cultural preservation." "Selective labeling" is at work in Third World contexts in which the conversion of many groups to Christianity does not raise qualms about "Westernization" or "cultural preservation," but where continuing adherence to female genital mutilation is represented as crucial to "preserving the culture." Similar arbitrariness is displayed by the Taliban in Afghanistan, which is obsessed with forcing women back to their "traditional place" but appears to have no qualms about

the cultural effects of its massive reliance on foreign or Western-produced armaments to maintain state power.

Sensitivity to "selective labeling" can also enable feminists in different national contexts to draw attention to the extensive changes that have occurred *in the lives of women and in practices affecting women* that were once regarded as problematic but have come to be regarded as acceptable cultural modifications by large segments of the population. For instance, public education for women, initially seen as culturally problematic by various segments of the Indian elites, became transformed, in the course of roughly two generations, into something not only permissible but virtually the norm for the daughters of these families. A good proportion of the Indian bourgeoisie today no longer endorse the "tradition" of marrying off girls just past puberty, but still raise the specter of "cultural betrayal" when some of their daughters challenge the tradition of arranged marriages. These examples show how saddling women with the primary responsibility for "cultural preservation" might remain a relative constant, even as prevailing notions of what women need to do to "preserve culture" change over time. The examples illustrate how feminist perspectives are empowered when criticisms of the adverse effects of particular "traditions" on women combine with a critical stance toward ahistorical and essentialist pictures of those "traditions."

#### "PROGRESSIVE" VERSIONS OF CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM

Third World feminist struggles against various forms of political fundamentalisms often confront essentialist notions of culture that cast fundamentalists as "defenders of national culture and traditions" and represent Third World feminists as cultural traitors corrupted by the seduction of "Western values." However, fundamentalists are not the only ones who subscribe to and deploy essentialist pictures of culture. Essentialist notions of culture are held by people who occupy a wide range of places on the political spectrum. Progressive Western and Third World subjects, too, sometimes uncritically endorse essentialist notions of what "Western culture" or a particular "Third World culture" amounts to. Like many ideological notions, the widespread acceptance of essentialist ideas of culture results from how obvious these ideas appear to a great many people. These ideas can inform people's thought without actually being subject to thought. As a result, Third World feminists themselves have not necessarily been immune to essentialist pictures of culture, especially to essentialist notions of the differences between "Western culture" and particular "Third World cultures." I would argue, for instance, that feminist discourses that have asserted "women's equality" to be a "Western value" whose extension to Third World contexts is "a culturally imperialist theme imposed by the First World," (an assertion made by Non-western governments and feminist

activists in the context of the 1975 International Women's Year conference) risk replicating essentialist notions of "culture."

Another example of cultural essentialism emanating from progressive parts of the political spectrum can be found in the contention, by feminists and others, that "human rights" are a "Western concept" whose extension to Third World contexts constitute an illegitimate "imposition of Western values." For instance, Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab have denied the legitimacy of employing Western cultural values to judge the institutions of non-Western cultures, insisting that the imposition on Third World societies of norms taken from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights amounts to moral chauvinism and ethnocentric bias (Pollis and Schwab, 1979). Such claims comprise problematic instances of cultural essentialism.

The assertion that "equality" and "human rights" are "Western values" is surely complicated by the historical reality that Western doctrines of equality and rights coexisted for decades with support for slavery and colonialism, and that equality and rights were denied to women; to racial, religious, and ethnic minorities within Western nations; and to virtually all subjects of colonized territories. It is only as a result of political struggles by these various excluded groups in both Western and Non-western contexts that doctrines of equality and rights have slowly come to be perceived as applicable to them, too. Thus, one could argue that doctrines of equality and rights, rather than being pure "products of Western imperialism" were often important products of such struggles *against Western imperialism*. Notions of equality and rights have often been significant in these struggles, and have long since embedded themselves in the vocabularies of Third World political struggles. Claims that "equality" and "rights" are "Western values" risk effacing the vital role that such notions have played and continue to play in those movements (Narayan 1993; Mayer 1995). In general, the *origins* of a practice or concept seldom limit its *scope of relevance*. Borrowing the ideas, practices, artifacts, and technologies of Others, assimilating them, and transforming them are ubiquitous processes, and hardly unique to Third World contexts. Entities of non-European origin that have been assimilated into "Western culture" over time include items as disparate as gunpowder, compasses, Christianity, and coffee.

Feminist claims that "equality" and "rights" are "Western values" also risk echoing the rhetoric of two groups of people who, despite their other differences, share the characteristic of being no friends of feminist agendas. The first are what I shall call "Western cultural supremacists," whose agenda of constructing flattering portraits of "Western culture" proceeds by claiming ideas of equality, rights, democracy, and so on as "Western ideas" that prove the West's moral and political superiority to all "Other" cultures (Bloom 1987; Schlesinger 1992). The second are Third World fundamentalists who share the views of Western cultural supremacists that all such notions are "Western ideas." Fundamentalists deploy these views to justify the claim that such ideas are

“irrelevant foreign notions” used only by “Westernized and inauthentic” Third World subjects and to cloak their violations of rights and suppression of democratic processes in the mantle of cultural preservation (Howard 1993; Mayer 1995).

Certainly, Third World feminists have legitimate concerns about how some Western feminists understand and unpack notions of “women’s equality.” And they have legitimate worries that some Western feminist human rights agendas might ignore or slight the problems and concerns of various groups of women in their national contexts. However, such conflicts and differences are often not well captured by characterizing them as differences between “Western” and “Third World” understandings of these concepts. Sucheta Mazumdar succinctly characterizes the dangers of deploying such essentialist moves even when characterizing genuine conflicts and divergences between Western and Third World feminists.

The U.N. Decade for Women was problematic for international women’s solidarity. Many U.S. and European feminists with a poor understanding of class, ethnicity and international political realities simply replayed colonial stereotypes of Third World nations, were extremely patronizing of women from these nations, and often made no effort to separate the foreign policy objectives of their national governments from those of an internationalist women’s movement. Third World women, for their part, rightly found this objectionable, and withdrew into a Third Worldist stance, replete with the rejection of feminism as a Western construct, omitting the fact that there is no such thing as “the Western woman”. . . . This fed popular male perceptions, both the liberal and the left in Third World nations, that the women’s movement was some concoction of female alienation in a commodity economy, and that it had no relevance in the collectivist ethos of Third World nations. (Mazumdar 1994, 268-69)

Interpretations of ideas such as rights and equality that are insensitive to the predicaments and vulnerabilities of members of socially marginalized groups, including women, do not emanate only from Western contexts; for instance, right-wing and fundamentalist movements in Third World contexts use notions of rights and equality for their own ends (Hasan 1994, xix). Today, a good many problematic political visions cut across national and geographical boundaries, as do valuable ones. I believe feminists are often better served by analyses that concretely show the particular ways that specific interpretations of rights or equality might be inadequate than by interpretations that criticize these notions for being “Western.”

Furthermore, notions such as rights and equality are seriously contested within both Western and Third World contexts, with the result that there is hardly one "Western" or "Third World" or "Indian" vision of these concepts (Kiss 1997). Differences about the significance, implications, and applications of these terms exist within Western and Third World national contexts, as well as cut across them. Elsewhere in this issue of *Hypatia*, Susan Okin reveals the political struggles it has taken, and continues to take, to revise human rights doctrines to take account of women's gendered vulnerabilities, in both Western and Third World contexts (Okin 1998). Her analysis suggests that politically detrimental and politically valuable understandings of human rights have existed in both Western and Third World contexts.

I would strongly endorse Ofelia Schutte's desire, also expressed in this issue, for a postcolonial feminist perspective that acknowledges the reality of colonialism and the fight against it (Schutte 1998). Postcolonial feminists have good reason to oppose many of the legacies of colonialism, as well as ongoing forms of economic exploitation and political domination by Western nations at the international level. However, I do not think such an agenda is well served either by uncritically denigrating values and practices that appear to be in some sense "Western" or by indiscriminately valorizing values and practices that appear "Non-western." Political rhetoric that polarizes "Western" and "Non-western" values risks obscuring the degree to which economic and political agendas, carried out in collaboration between particular Western and Third World elites, work to erode the rights and quality of life for many citizens in both Western and Third World contexts. Such polarizations detract attention from realpolitik-driven collaborations that result in Western economic and military support for brutal and undemocratic Third World regimes, many of whom spout "anti-Western cultural preservation" rhetoric even as they remain deeply enmeshed in economic, political, and military collaboration with Western nations.

Political rhetoric that polarizes "Western" and "Non-western" values is dangerous in Third World contexts in which progressive and feminist agendas often contest policies that are backed not only by Western powers but by local elites and nation-states. Feminists must keep in mind that a value or practice's being "Non-western" (either in terms of its origin or its context of prevalence) does not mean that it is anti-imperialist or anti-colonial, let alone compatible with feminist agendas. Feminists must also remember that a value or practice's being "Western" in its origins does not mean that it can play no part in the service of anticolonial or postcolonial feminist agendas—as Okin's discussion of international human rights discourse demonstrates (Okin, 1998).

## CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM

Many feminists are tempted to regard relativism as "a weapon against intellectual tyranny" because they share Lorraine Code's sense that it is "demonstrably preferable to imperialist alternatives that recognize no limits" (Code 1998). Many feminists regard relativism as an antidote to "affirmations of universal sameness" that permits those who are privileged "to claim to have access to the one true story" (Code 1998). Relativism appears to be a useful deterrent to Western feminist inclinations to speak for or about women situated elsewhere or differently as though they were "just like us." I agree that one can continue to find feminist analyses in which inattention to differences among women facilitates the assumption that "they are just like us" and results in attempts to speak for or about "all women" without sufficient attention to their differences.

However, as my discussion in the first section of this essay indicates, I am reluctant simply to *equate* this problem that constitutes a central concern for contemporary feminist analysis, with the phenomenon of "cultural imperialism" as such. Part of what gives me pause in making this equation is my sense that "cultural imperialism" as it functioned in colonial times had a quite different logic, which *denied rather than affirmed* that one's Others were "just like oneself." I do not wish to deny that the agendas of the colonizing powers required some projection of "Sameness" on colonized peoples. The "civilizing mission" of colonialism, including the project of converting "the natives" to Christianity and the project of drawing colonized populations into European economic and political arrangements, did involve assumptions about forms of "Sameness" that would enable these populations to benefit from "becoming like Westerners" in these ways. However, even these projections of Sameness involved seeing Others as only "deficient examples of the same" (Lange 1998). Without this difference of "deficiency," the colonized populations' need for the colonial tutelage of Western nations would be undermined. The projected "Sameness" was merely an underlying *potential* in the colonized that signified their ability to benefit from the "progress" conferred by colonial rule.

The colonial willingness and eagerness to speak "for and about Others," and the colonialists' conviction that "theirs was the one true story," was, I believe, intimately interwoven with views that insisted on the colonized Others' *difference from, and inferiority to, the Western Subject*. While "assumptions of sameness" might well be the hallmark of one problematic tendency that haunts contemporary feminist analysis, I believe it is a serious mistake to take this "assumption of sameness" as the singular defining feature of "cultural imperialism" when "assumptions of difference" have played a substantial role as well. Once it is recognized that "assumptions of difference" have been deployed for cultural imperialist ends no less expeditiously than "assumptions

of sameness," the temptation to relativism that is motivated by a desire to avoid cultural imperialism ought, I believe, to considerably weaken. An "insistence on cultural difference" was even more characteristic of the colonial project than gestures towards "sameness," an insistence that helped to cover over the sad similarities of ethnocentrism, androcentrism, classism, heterosexism, and other objectionable "centrisms" that often pervaded both sides of this reiterated "contrast" between "Western culture" and its several "Others."

My analysis underscores how much colonial mandates, as well as the political visions of contemporary Third World fundamentalisms, rely on a picture that focuses on "essential differences" between Western and particular Third World cultures. Insofar as versions of relativism subscribe to these colonial pictures of "essential differences" between cultures, relativism becomes a danger rather than an asset to feminist agendas. My previous analysis demonstrates how representations of particular Third World "cultures" that appeal to relativist notions that "our values and ways of life are distinct from those of Western Others, and constitute our national identity and authenticity" can be at least as detrimental to the interests of many Third World women as any "affirmations of universal sameness."

Many versions of relativism rely on a picture of "cultures" that I previously criticized as culturally essentialist, a picture in which cultures appear neatly, prediscursively, individuated from each other; in which the insistence on "Difference" that accompanies the "production" of distinct "cultures" appears unproblematic; and the central or constitutive components of a "culture" are assumed to be "unchanging givens." Such relativist pictures of cultural differences are, I believe, both empirically inaccurate and inimical to the interests of postcolonial feminists. Rather than embracing relativism, an anti-imperialist postcolonial feminism is better served by critically interrogating scripts of "cultural difference" that set up sharp binaries between "Western" and various "Non-western" cultures. Such interrogation will reveal both sides of the binary to be, in large measure, *totalizing idealizations*, whose Imaginary status has been concealed by a colonial and postcolonial history of ideological deployments of this binary.

For reasons suggested by the preceding remarks, I am not convinced by Lorraine Code's position that with respect to dismantling the master's house "relativism . . . may not be able to do it all, but it is demonstrably preferable to the alternatives" (Code 1998). Third World feminist political struggles are often painfully aware that there are a number of "master's houses." Some of these houses are owned not by "Western" masters but are part of the local real estate, while others have deeds so intricate that it is difficult to unravel how much they are the properties of "local" or "Western" masters. In their attempts to dismantle a number of these "master's houses," Third World feminists often discover that forms of cultural relativism have an important place in the

tool-kits of local masters, leaving feminists susceptible to attacks as “Westernized cultural traitors” who suffer from a lack of appreciation for “their traditions” and respect for “their culture.” Forms of relativism have often enough functioned to strengthen the hand of a variety of masters. Feminists cannot afford only to be wary of “universal” claims, but must seek to understand the variety of dangerous ideological uses to which forms of both “universalist” and “relativist” claims can be put.

I would argue that what postcolonial feminists need to do is not to endorse “cultural relativism” but to resist various forms of cultural essentialism, *including relativist versions*. In addition to the strategies I previously mentioned, feminists need to resist cultural essentialism by pointing to the internal plurality, dissension and contestation over values, and ongoing changes in practices in virtually all communities that comprise modern nation-states. This critique of cultural essentialism would reject the idea that there is anything that can solidly and uncontroversially be defined as “Indian culture” or “African culture,” or “Western culture” for that matter. It would proceed by challenging a “picture of the world” that some versions of cultural relativism assume to be true: that there are *neat packages called “different cultures,” each of which is internally consistent and monolithic, and which disagrees only with “Other cultures.”*

The position I am endorsing does not deny the existence of “cultural differences” *per se*. It would be foolish to deny that there are practices in certain contexts that are absent in others, and values that are endorsed in some quarters that are not endorsed in others. Rather, the position I endorse denies that “actual cultural differences” correspond very neatly to the “packages” that are currently individuated as “separate cultures” or manifest themselves as evenly distributed across particular “cultures.” It insists that virtually all contemporary contexts are full of political debate and dissension about their practices and values, and it refuses to grant any of these perspectives the status of being the sole “authentic representative” of the views and values of a particular culture. It suggests that wariness about projected Imaginary “essential differences” might better facilitate our taking account of the multiplicity of real differences in values, interests, and worldviews that traverse contemporary national and transnational contexts. I believe that the exchanges between various feminist discourse communities that Jaggar analyzes (Jaggar 1998) are crucial sites for clarifying the nature and import of a multiplicity of real differences that might mark feminist agendas in different national contexts, even as they provide spaces for contesting essentialist notions of “cultural differences.”

While critical of particular pictures of “cultural differences” that underlie certain forms of cultural relativism, my counter-picture does not suffice to answer many important questions that arise in philosophical discussions about relativism. It remains agnostic, for instance, on the question of whether there

is one neat and complete universal set of values that ought to command everyone's assent, but optimistic about the prospects for making many of the values that inform progressive politics and feminist agendas meaningful and efficacious in a variety of global contexts.

I would like to end by clarifying the connections between my critique of cultural essentialism and my stance on "generalizations" about cultures. Discussing the issue of gender essentialism, Okin argues that "the feminist anti-essentialist critique was at times carried to the extreme of asserting that no generalizations at all could be made about women" (Okin 1998). Does a commitment to opposing cultural essentialism entail a commitment to the extreme view that no generalizations at all can be made about "cultures?" It is my view that neither antiessentialism about gender nor antiessentialism about cultures entails an absolute prohibition on generalization, because all generalizations are not equally problematic. I would argue that there are significant differences between generalizations like "prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work for African women" cited critically by Mohanty (Mohanty 1991), and generalizations such as the statement of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which asserts, "Women continue to be discriminated against all over the world as regards the recognition, enjoyment, and exercise of their individual rights in public and private and are subject to many forms of violence" (Bunch 1994, 35).

The former generalization is not only empirically false but also offensive and dangerous. The latter is both arguably true and politically useful in calling attention to human rights violations against women in a multiplicity of national contexts. The latter sort of generalization does not entail, and should not be taken to entail, the absence of variations within and across national contexts in the form of human rights violations that confront different groups of women. The claim that virtually every community is structured by relationships of gender that comprise specific forms of social, sexual, and economic subjection of women seems a generalization that is politically useful; it also leaves room for attention to differences and particularities of context with respect to the predicaments of different groups of women. I believe that the items on Martha Nussbaum's list of important human capabilities and functions are also generalizations of the latter sort, for she intends the list to "allow in its very design for the possibility of multiple specifications of each of the components" (Nussbaum 1995, 93).

I believe that antiessentialism about gender and about culture does not entail a simple-minded opposition to *all generalizations*, but entails instead a commitment to examine both their empirical accuracy and their political utility or risk. It is seldom possible to articulate effective political agendas, such as those pertaining to human rights, without resorting to a certain degree of abstraction, which enables the articulation of salient similarities between

problems suffered by various individuals and groups. On the other hand, it seems arguably true that there is no need to portray female genital mutilation as an "African cultural practice" or dowry murders and dowry related harassment as a "problem of Indian women" in ways that eclipse the fact that not *all* "African women" or "Indian women" confront these problems, or confront them in identical ways, or in ways that efface local contestations of these problems.

The antiessentialist perspective I advocate does not endorse the view that the existence of cultural and other "differences" renders equally suspect each and every sort of generalization or universalistic claim. Kwame Anthony Appiah makes a useful point when he reminds us that "it is characteristic of those who pose as antiuniversalists to use the term universalism as if it meant *pseudouniversalism*. . . . What they truly object to—and who would not?—is Eurocentric hegemony posing as universalism" (Appiah 1992, 58). I would add that many of the essentialist pictures of "Indian culture" and the like that I critique are forms of what one might call "pseudoparticularism"—equally hegemonic representations of "particular cultures" whose "particularism" masks the reality that they are problematic generalizations about complex and internally differentiated contexts. Besides, even the injunction to attend to a variety of "differences" can hardly avoid the universalistic cast of a general prescription, and no political agenda can avoid general normative assessments of the salience and weight of particular kinds of "differences."

Given the significant dangers that varieties of cultural essentialism pose to feminist agendas, I believe that the development of a feminist perspective that is committed to antiessentialism both about "women" and about "cultures" is an urgent and important task for a postcolonial feminist perspective. Such a perspective must distinguish and extricate feminist projects of attending to differences among women from problematically essentialist colonial and postcolonial understandings of "cultural differences" between Western culture and its "Others." This essay is a contribution to the project of thinking about how contemporary feminists can resist reified and essentialist pictures of "cultures" and of "cultural contrasts" between "Western culture" and "Third World cultures," and submit them to critical interrogation.<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTE

1. I would like to thank Jennifer Church, Sandra Harding, Jim Hill, Tina Sheth and Susan Zlotnick for their generous assistance with various drafts of this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1992. *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The closing of the American mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bunch, Charlotte. 1994. Strengthening human rights of women. In *World conference on human rights Vienna 1993: The contributions of NGOs reports and documents*, ed. Manfred Nowak. Vienna: Manzsche Verlags und Universitätsbuchhandlung.
- Code, Lorraine. 1998. How to think globally: Stretching the limits of imagination. *Hypatia* 13(2): 73-85.
- Daly, Mary. 1978. Indian suttee: The ultimate consummation of marriage. In *Gyn/Ecology: The MetaEthics of radical feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hasan, Zoya, ed. 1994. *Forging identities: gender, communities and the state in India*. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Hawley, John Stratton, ed. 1994. *Sati, the blessing and the curse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- hooks, bell. 1981. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Howard, Rhoda. 1993. Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community. *Human Rights Quarterly* 15: 315-38.
- Jaggar, Alison. 1998. Globalizing Feminist Ethics, *Hypatia* 13(2): 7-31.
- Kipling, Rudyard. 1944. The Ballad of East and West. In *Rudyard Kipling's verse*, New York: Doubleday.
- Kiss, Elizabeth. 1997. Alchemy or fool's gold: Assessing feminist doubts about rights. In *Reconstructing political theory: Feminist perspectives*, ed. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Uma Narayan. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Koso-Thomas, Olayinka. 1987. *The circumcision of women: A strategy for eradication*. London: Zed Books.
- Kumar, Radha. 1994. Identity politics and the contemporary Indian feminist movement. In *Identity politics and women: Cultural reassertions and feminisms in international perspective*. ed. Valentine Moghadam. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Lange, Lynda. N.d. Burnt offerings to rationality: A feminist reading of the construction of indigenous peoples in Enrique Dussel's theory of modernity. *Hypatia* 13(3).
- Lugones, María C., and Elizabeth V. Spelman. 1983. Have we got a theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism, and the demand for "The Woman's Voice" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6(6): 573-81.
- Mani, Lata. 1987. Contentious traditions: The debate on SATI in Colonial India. *Cultural Critique* Fall: 19-56.
- Mayer, Ann Elizabeth. 1995. *Islam and human rights: Tradition and politics*. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Mazumdar, Sucheta. 1994. Moving away from a secular vision? Women, nation, and the cultural construction of Hindu India. In *Identity politics and women: Cultural reassertions and feminisms in international perspective*, ed. Valentine Moghadam. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In *Third World women and the politics of feminism*, ed. Chandra

- Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Narayan, Uma. 1993. What do rights have to do with it?: Reflections on what distinguishes "traditional non-Western" frameworks from contemporary rights-based systems. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 24(2): 186-99.
- . 1995. Eating cultures: Incorporation, identity and "Indian food." *Social Identities* 1(1): 63-88.
- . 1997. *Dislocating cultures: Identities, traditions and Third World feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. Human capabilities, Female human beings. In *Women, Culture and Development*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nussbaum Martha C. and Jonathan Glover, eds. 1995. *Women, culture and development*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Okin, Susan Moller. 1998. Feminism, women's human rights, and cultural differences. *Hypatia* 13(2): 32-52.
- Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. 1994. The continuing invention of the Sati tradition. In *Sati, the blessing and the curse*, ed. John Stratton Hawley. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pollis, Adamantia and Peter Schwab. 1979. *Human rights: cultural and ideological perspectives*. New York: Praeger.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr. 1992. *The disuniting of America: Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Schutte, Ofelia. 1998. Cultural alterity: Cross-cultural communication and feminist thought in North-South contexts. *Hypatia* 13(2): 53-72.