

Political Ideologies of Western Feminism in the Context of the Women's Movement in the Philippines*

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First of all, allow me to express my discomfort with my topic. One of the fundamental tensions between women on the one hand and patriarchy on the other is the accusation, rightly made, by women of being objectified by male-ordered discourse, one that sees women as just being mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, nieces and spinster aunts of sons, husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and nephews. My role of articulating for you the ideologies that have driven your countless struggles to claim your rightful place in society is, to my mind, another patriarchal assault on women. As a male, even as perhaps already sensitized by and sensitive to a feminist discourse, I remain an outsider, a transgressor, an intruder into a domain which rightfully belongs to women.

But allow me to be uncomfortable, allow me to squirm, and allow my presence and the scarcity of representatives of my gender in this gathering be an empirical evidence of how little men have appreciated women's issues, and how the male species could boast of machismo—imagined or real—only to be rendered uncomfortable in the company of women outside the bedroom.

I am reminded of Kathy Ferguson, a noted feminist and luckily one of the members of my dissertation committee, a woman who has deeply touched my politics and whose dedication in her first book read: "to my Grandfather and Father who raised a girl to become a feminist". In one of my personal conversations with her, and it was during a time when I had no idea of what feminism was all about, I made the mistake of asking her why it is that rape is being described as purely a process of victimizing women, when there are cases where men are also raped. Her response was my first lesson in radical feminism. She said that my question mani-

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fested the kind of patriarchal garbage I have always had in my psyche. The question is an ideological tactic called fragmentation wherein a minority experience—such as men being raped—is deployed to weaken an argument by posing a counter-case, no matter how insignificant it is. Thus, rape is degenderized and the fact that 99% of rape victims are women is lost in the play of language. She quickly added that being raped by women is usually a sexual fantasy of a lot of men, and that in reality, most of male victims are raped not by women but by other men. In this, the men are “feminized” by being forced to take the role of women in the process.

The reason why I am mentioning this personal anecdote is to call attention to the fact that the name “Gender Relations” in lieu of “Women’s Studies” is perhaps an ideological manifestation of fragmentation. In the Philippine setting, a lot of women, and men, are boasting that we live in a relatively gender-equal society manifested in the fact that there are many women professionals, politicians, and even a President who is a woman. The metaphor of a “hen-pecked husband” is a comic discursive strategy which deflects the otherwise real practice of women lording it over in the arena of the home. These examples could lead someone to say that “Women’s Studies” is an anachronistic label which serves no purpose except to draw another division among us. The better term, in this line of thinking, would be “Gender Relations”, —a relatively nice phrase presumably evoking a communalistic and as though unproblematic interaction between genders—even if a closer look at reality would lead us to an ugly sight: a lot of cases of unreported rape and sexual harrassment of women, of wife abuse, of patriarchy ever present in popular culture and everyday practices—both symbolic and material—, from which this university is not exempt.

We always delude ourselves regarding the power that women allegedly hold over men in the realm of the home even if this is “old news” since the home has always been the territory of women. We pride ourselves on having women faculty members and scientists and public servants, even if we fail to discern the anomalous patterns of having mostly male deans, department heads, and chief executive officers. We are quick to point out that we have a woman President, two women senators, and about 20 women representatives, not to mention the countless women barangay captains, mayors, governors, and *sanggunian* members, without realizing that a significant majority of these women have ended up as politicians because a father, husband, son, or brother retired from politics or died while in office.

Thus, even as we talk about gender relations, we will undoubtedly end up talking about women. It is like when we talk about class, we end up talking about the poor; or if we talk about race, we end up talking about the people of color. As residents of an institution which thrives on the assumption that we have in our hands the burden of enlightenment, we have

always operated on the belief that what we do should make the “worse off” better. This is why we have always set our eyes on development as a key concept, a cornerstone of our instruction, research, and extension programs. In the university, the unwritten assumption is that we should work for the empowerment of the powerless. It is therefore logical that when we talk, we talk about and for the victim, and in the arena of gender relations, the historical, logical, and real victims are almost always women. To do otherwise is to contradict the liberal-humanist traditions of a good university.

Of course, we have to talk about men as well, but we should do it in the context of women’s lives and women’s struggles, not as sources of counter-examples which fragment and disenable meaningful conversations. The reason why we should have a special place for the articulation of women’s discourse is because the university, as it is with all its structures and practices, is patriarchal. I beg to disagree with the view that it is otherwise, and strongly oppose any move to silence women’s voices by the deployment of arguments which dissimulate the hidden and overt patriarchy lurking around us.

Feminism as a Social Movement

Let me point out that women’s struggles have always been present in history. However, since history is written by those who wield power, the views of women, like those of the poor and indigenous peoples, are absent in official historical texts. However, these subalterns in history, whose power and knowledge were suppressed and marginalized, were never silent. Historians who are now trying to rewrite history according to the viewpoint of the silenced forces are finding out the richness of subaltern voices, including those of women.

But fascination in subaltern history is a much more recent event compared to the history of feminism as a social movement. Mainly cast in a western discourse, feminism is rooted in the liberal traditions of the early decades of the 20th century dominated by calls for equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal entitlements for women in society. The earlier versions of feminism focused on the role of women in public life—of women gaining access to education, employment, and political influence. However, later versions of feminism have taken to task not only the inequalities in the public sphere manifested in women’s exclusion in education and suffrage, among others, but have elevated the struggle in two fronts: the arena of the home as an enslaving domain for women, and of sexuality as an insidious and objectifying mechanism of patriarchy. The contemporary strands of feminism include liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and eco-feminism.

● *Liberal Feminism.*

Liberal feminism is governed by a liberal ideology, an obvious continuation of early 20th century feminism which demands equal rights

and the removal of legal and political discrimination against women, and the placement of more women in positions of power.

● *Socialist Feminism.*

Orthodox Marxist theory, as a popular ideology for a lot of social movements, is conspicuously silent on gender issues by refusing to examine the social positions of women and by having no analysis of the family. Socialist feminism has reformulated orthodox Marxism by arguing that the continued operation of capitalist production is contingent upon a system of social and biological reproduction taking place in the home. Some socialist feminists, for example, consider that women's unpaid labor in the home directly or indirectly increases the profits of capitalists who do not have to pay the full costs of the daily upkeep of men as fit, healthy workers (Dale and Foster, 1986). Socialist feminists who give primacy to class-based oppression of women have fought for reforms which benefit working-class women, and which simultaneously challenge capitalist economic and social relationships.

● *Radical Feminism.*

Radical feminist theory is not directed at seeking equality with men. Instead, it is mostly presupposed on a rejection of men and of the patriarchal values and institutions they have created and which sustain them. Firestone (1979) argues that sexual oppression is the root from which all other oppressions flow. Thus, women's social and economic disadvantage is the result of their role in the sexual division of labor as the sole biological bearer and the primary rearer of children. Radical feminists demand a full control of their own bodies and reproduction, and favor abortion and lesbian marriages. They are also active in denouncing male violence on women.

● *Ecofeminism.*

Lately, the feminist movement has juxtaposed with environmental movements giving rise to ecofeminism as a brand new ideology which draws parallelisms between destruction of nature and patriarchy. Moreover, nature is feminized by arguing that women, like nature, are traditionally seen as nurturers, life-givers, and sustainers.

Tensions Between Gender, Class and Race

The Western traditions of feminism have always been troubled by tensions between women belonging to different groups in society, even as it is already divided along different ideological strands. Although womanhood is already a social category, it is a reality that rich women have different experiences, and therefore different concerns, compared to poor women; and that the oppression of women of color is different from the oppression of white women. The picture becomes even more confusing if we force ourselves to compare between white, rich women; white, poor women; rich women of color; and poor women of color. what further

complicates the matter is when we try to locate in the equation—or the calculus of oppression—the place for a poor man of color.

One of the most disempowering enterprises in political discourse is to answer the question of who is more oppressed. It becomes divisive and depoliticizing since it tears social categories asunder. Feminists have always been divided across class and racial lines; Marxists across gender and racial lines; and anti-colonialists across class and gender lines. It is perhaps helpful to consider that there is always a hierarchy of oppression which is ontologically based and determined in a given resistor-subject condition. Someone who is pondering on what strategies of resistance to take in a given context should carefully analyze the dynamics of the situation in order to determine the required and appropriate political action: people should decide whether they are oppressed more as women, or as members of the working class, or as persons of color. Some would even argue that differentiations such as these are essential, even if they are divisive, since they lead to a more focused struggle, a more clearly-defined array of political niches which could lay the foundations for alliances and fronts—referred to in the literature as “radical pluralism” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Feminism and Decolonization: The Case of the Philippines

A more useful and relevant arena of tensions in the women's movement in the Third World are the ones existing between Western-defined ideologies of feminism and anti-colonial movements.

At this point, let me define myself as a colonized intellectual, like most of you. We live in a privileged position in our society. Being such, we have choices to make: whether we should take the side of the colonizer by becoming instruments, if not active advocates of the discourse of colonization; or take the side of the colonized and become active in movements to de-colonize ourselves. For those who choose the latter path, the fundamental question is what sort of decolonization project are we going to take. Is it a recovery project wherein we go back to where we were; or is it a project of reconstruction wherein we take remnants of our past and combine this with outsiders' constructs in order to forge for ourselves—as active determinants of our history—a new identity different from our colonized present?

I have come to believe that the historical experiences of the Philippines effectively prevents a recovery project from prospering, not only because of our multiple past identities, but also because of a totalizing colonization which made us forget our past, and then forget that we forgot. Unlike the case of the native American Indians, or of the native Hawaiians, wherein projects of recovery can actually mobilize people to build nations, a project of recovery in the Philippines could mean the death of the Filipino

nation and the birth of an Igorot nation, a Lumad nation, a Mangyan nation, an Aeta nation. As a Bicolano who is half-bred between a father with Chinese ancestry and a mother with Spanish blood, I have the fear—which I am sure most of you also have—of having no place to go back to.

A project of reconstruction is more compatible with our history and our present state. In choosing this path, we will have to ask the question of which remnants of our past we should preserve and which concepts from the outside we should adopt.

It is in this that we can connect the question of Western feminism with the process of decolonization.

There is a mixed response on the query of whether indigenous Filipino cultures are patriarchal, matriarchal, or gender-equal; and whether the entry of colonial forces altered or reversed these relationships. There are those who argue that women had more power in pre-colonial societies, some of which were allegedly relatively gender-equal, evident in the prevalence of women warriors and priestesses exemplified in the images of Princesa Urduja and of the Babaylan. Those who argue this way also posit that the indigenous interpretation of creation is structurally gender-equal, wherein Malakas and Maganda came out of a bamboo together, unlike the Judeo-Christian interpretation which depicts Eve as someone just plucked from the ribs of Adam. It is believed that the forces of colonization brought to our shores the idea and practices of patriarchy.

Others argue that some pre-colonial Filipino groups were bastions of patriarchy. Thus, even as Hispanic colonization solidified the indigenous patriarchal structures and bestowed upon it a Western face, with its Victorian morals manifested in the image of Maria Clara, the advent of American colonization however ushered in liberal ideas which slowly but surely opened up the doors for women to have a voice and a vote. Here, it is claimed that American colonization assisted in dismantling patriarchy, or if not, significantly weakened it.

It is important to point out that the recruitment of Western feminism—especially its liberal ideologies—in a project of reconstruction is culturally compatible with women's movements in the Philippines. If indeed colonization has brought patriarchy, the liberal traditions of a structural, even if substantially-weak, democracy which we have inherited from the Americans nonetheless can nurture the explosion of liberal feminism in support of reconstructive decolonization. Even as our sense of morality will make a lot of us shudder in the face of the earth-shaking ideologies of radical feminism, it is also useful for the women's movement in the Philippines to take on the issues of sexuality and of sexual violence against women as perpetrated by men, the latter compounded by the complicity of women who accept the home as their rightful place and of male leadership as a pre-cursor to family life in spite of domestic violence. And lastly, some elements of socialist feminism can provide women's movements some

insights into women's place in the class-structure of Philippine society, and how women can deal with it.

In those cases wherein colonization has indeed weakened patriarchy, a movement to de-colonize through a project of reconstruction will have to retain the gender-equalizing attributes of colonial experience, and perhaps just reorient it to suit the needs of Filipino women.

The Case of Women and Islam

The case of Islamic societies, of which there is a significant number in the Philippines, requires some special attention. In Islam, there is no separation between state and religion. Unlike Christianity, wherein exists a relatively volatile and socially-changing secular society, the secular practices in Islam are deeply imbedded in religious belief structures. To a Western-informed feminist, some Islamic practices, both religious and secular, are oppressive of women. Western feminists have lamented the practices of veiling, polygamy, weak suffrage, and other patriarchal practices prevailing in Islamic societies.

However, the whole matter becomes problematic when one juxtaposes the desire for gender-equality with the desire to decolonize, or in this case, the desire to protect Islamic culture and religion from the onslaught of Western colonization. Here, the choice is between protecting indigenous culture at the expense of preserving patriarchy, or prescribing the colonial invasion of a culture by Western feminism so that women can be empowered. But here, perhaps we should be informed that the internal logic of gender relations, even in extremely patriarchal settings, are altered in the context of resistance to outside forces. Women have played significant roles in the Iranian and Nicaraguan revolutions. In the Cordilleras, despite the patriarchal structures of Igorot political life, women have taken active roles in their fight against alienating forms of development. The participation of women in collective struggles undoubtedly illustrates a self-determined absorption of outsiders' concepts and a re-conceptualization of indigenous gender relations in the face of changing times.

Some Words of Caution For Us

Right now, we are in the midst of determining what this university should do regarding relations (read: women's issues), specifically on matters pertaining to rural development. Not only are we courting the danger of becoming agents of colonization of Islamic and other indigenous women if we are not careful, there is also the risk that we might be imprisoned in a liberal discourse that speaks of equality without seriously considering the fact that rural social structures are patriarchal and class-determined. We might be producing and imparting knowledge about womens' rights and entitlements without addressing patriarchy, political patronage, and elite politics which undermine the participation of women.

The other risk is that far from promoting gender-equality and women's empowerment, we might fall into the trap of reinforcing women's roles by developing technologies that make them into even better housewives and mothers. Or to put it bluntly, by perpetuating the "mother's club syndrome"—teaching them how to crochet, or raise orchids, or cook, or arrange flowers.

In the final analysis, as a member of the male species whose gender has been implicated a million times in the various tales of woe of women, I have no right to tell women how to empower themselves. But allow me these parting words: patriarchy infects women as well as men, women who are complicitous, submissive, silent, and worse, active articulators of male-ordered discourse. You might one day find out that the worst enemy of women are not men, but other women who accept a world shaped and ruled by men.

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