

WOMAN AS NOMAD: AN ALTERNATIVE CONFIGURATION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

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As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as
a woman my country is the whole world.¹

No planetary exiles, women today are better thought of as being
locally situated and therefore differently and multiply located.²

There has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I?
But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does
she name me?³

One consequence of the encounter with the contemporary theories of subjectivity has been an anxiety over the state of feminism in a postmodern, post-industrial, post-colonial age, in which "We cannot know who we are until we act, and our action always takes place in a particular context of relationship to and dialogue with particular others."⁴ It is no easy task for feminism to chart the ground on which to base its politics, due to the simple fact that questions of definitions and context overlap as the histories of colonialism, capitalism, race and gender are viewed as interrelated. Ours is a world in which, with the rise of transnational corporations, the nation-state has lost its significance as a socioeconomic unit for analysis while, paradoxically, ethnic or religious differences are being used negatively and divisively for the interests of

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¹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938; reprint, London:Penguin,1978)

² Rosi Bradiotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 257

³ Gayatri Spivak, as quoted in Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.211

⁴ Anna Yeatman, "Interlocking Oppressions" in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle, eds., *Transitions:New Australian Feminisms* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995) p.55

globalisation. In addition, the people living in the underdeveloped countries have been exposed to the influence of Western culture, while on the other hand, the massive migration of ex-colonial populations to Europe has resulted in the creation of multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-linguistic social formations similar to those in the U.S.A. All of these developments call for cross-national and cross-cultural analyses that take into consideration the intersecting lines of power and resistance in terms of a number of variables such as sex, race, class, ethnicity, and life-style.

Given this state of affairs, feminism risks losing its practical efficacy as a politics of the future unless it views the issue of differences between women as differences of power between women, especially when a certain form of western feminism associated with liberal reform and compatible with capitalism is presented as common sense in the mainstream. In this respect, Adrienne Rich's notion of "politics of location" is important in that it implies the critique of dominant identities by refusing to simply recognise differences among women, and to celebrate them, in the name of a multiculturalism, which does not accept accountability for power formations. In a poem she wrote in 1989 Audre Lorde most powerfully expresses the significance of the location from which one is speaking and addresses the issue of implicit power relations underlying differences :⁵

The US and the USSR are the most
powerful countries
in the world
but only 1/8 of the world's population.
African people are also 1/8 of the world's
population.
of that, ¼ is Nigerian.
½ of the world's population is Asian.
½ of that is Chinese.

There are 22 nations in the middle east.

Most people in the world
are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female
Non-Christian
and do not speak english.

⁵ Audre Lorde, unpublished poem, quoted in her commencement address to Oberlin College, 29 May 1989, as qtd. in Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al., eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) p.1

By the year 2000
the 20 largest cities in the world
will have one thing in common
none of them will be in Europe
none in the United States.

As far as contemporary feminist theory's interest in re-conceptualising the relationships between theory and politics and in re-defining the subject of feminism is concerned, the politics of location is a key term in that it calls for the recognition of the multiple differences that exist among women, and the rejection of global statements about all women, and stresses the importance of being aware of the place from which one is speaking. "Taking this argument to its logical conclusion, one could claim that there are as many centres as there are women," speculates Chilla Bulbeck, who then goes on to say:

In a sense there are. But political and theoretical pressures accord particular salience to some differences, for example identities based on class, race/ethnicity, sexuality and, more recently, age. The emerging interest in whiteness and westernness has been produced by political and ideological pressure from women for whom race has long been salient. White western feminists are now beginning to see themselves as particularised in terms of their ethnicity or culture through a growing interest in other women.⁶

Whereas once the presumably homogenous subject "woman" was considered to be both the speaking subject of, and the subject spoken about in, feminist discourse, now the difference between 'speaking *as* a woman' and 'speaking *of* or *in the name of* woman' is being recognised as the crucial problem of feminist theory. The crisis brought about by the postmodernist view of the 'death of the subject' remains to be overcome by new forms of feminist political imagination that will bridge the gap between 'woman' as signifier and women as historically constituted and embodied subjects. Feminists as different from each other as Luce Irigaray and Donna Haraway, for example, have already attempted to tackle that problem by proposing alternative configurations of the female subject. Irigaray's metaphorical use of the images of female morphology or Haraway's model of the cyborg as a high-tech imaginary are examples of feminist political fictions aimed at opening up new possibilities to

⁶ Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 3-4

produce affirmative representations of different forms of subjectivity of women.⁷

Rosi Braidotti's theorising of a new model of female feminist subjectivity in a nomadic mode is fuelled by a similar desire to situate feminist politics within the parameters of the postmodern predicament. The configuration of 'woman as nomad' responds to the women's universal 'homelessness' formulated as far back as 1938 by Virginia Woolf, in a way which takes into consideration the political implications of multiple locations and of cultural diversity:

Maybe women are historically nomadic, in that they are not yet first class citizens. And yet the challenge to which the women of today must face up is to conjugate the positive aspects of this nomadic condition with something that we would call responsibility for and accountability to our gender. In other words, the complexities of "internationalism" implies a confrontation of the many differences that separate and distinguish women among themselves, instead of providing yet another falsely reassuring blanket term for global sisterhood.⁸

Braidotti's configuration of nomadic subjectivity questions a certain form of internationalism which was, for historical reasons, led by the hegemony of the white western feminists, and more importantly calls for "the simultaneous other focus" articulated by Spivak who has provided invaluable insight into the nature of differences that divide women in the first and the third worlds. In this respect Braidotti's "nomadic women" can function as the 'third term' to deconstruct the binary opposition between the first and the third world women. That binary opposition is itself a construct employed here in order to foreground "third world women" as a provisional category against the background of assumptions regarding the history of western feminism.

At this point the category of third world women requires some clarification for it involves the risk of addressing a large variety of women's experiences under a single rubric. The term "third world" is used here in a broader sense, previously defined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty,⁹ as referring to

⁷ See, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) and Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991)

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) pp. 256-7

⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction" to Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al., eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 1-41

particular sociohistorical rather than geographical and/or national boundaries, and suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. Therefore, the territory inhabited by the third world women is not only a geographical construction but also an imagined space occupied by not only the women who actually live in the third world, but also the diaspora women from Asian, African and other third world countries. What these women have in common is a form of subjectivity, which can be compared to that of a traveller in an act of constant shift of locations and levels of experience. Their travelling, however, is metaphorical rather than literal, relating to their experiences of often-conflictual cultural practices. It is this idea of travelling in an imagined space shared by an imagined community of women that is particularly interesting because of its associative links with the notions of home and identity, which have played a major part in the first world women's constructions of themselves. For these notions have a lot to do with the anxiety some western feminists feel when they recognise the built-in privilege of their location as a centre to speak from, compounded by the postmodern crisis of the subject. Take Epstein and Steinberg for example:

We find (in) ourselves ('the state of feminism') enmeshed in a paradox. Theoretically and politically we no longer believe in the value of attempting to fix a theoretical unity for feminism or to fix an address in terms of its location or mode. But this leaves us stranded, in some crucial way homeless and in need of an address.¹⁰

The allusion to the good old days when feminists believed in the "theoretical unity" of feminism, and they could confidently "fix an address" for it, reveals more than an urgent need to find a home, a central identity, for feminism to replace the no-longer-acceptable ones. One might as well see it as a case of nostalgic depression of which the symptoms involve the construction of memories of a lost home that never existed in reality, or at least did not exist in the way it is remembered at all. In which case, the narrative constructed on the assumption that feminism once had a safe abode, which was then lost to postmodernism and post-colonialism can be read as a denial of feminism's ever-homeless status. Is the allusion to a lost home, then, the illusion of a home? Could it be the case that the voice of the 'other' woman, whose relation to home has never been one of total belonging, is in fact bringing to the surface the ur-trauma, the exclusion of woman from the 'master's house'? What if there is an alternative reading to the story that feminism has often narrated about its own history?

¹⁰ Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "No Fixed Abode: Feminism in the 1990s", *Parallax* 3 (September 1996) 1-6, p.5

That version of feminist history tells us that feminism began with the phase of a simple adherence to the discourse of human rights in the belief that women's entry into the public domain would liberate them. What followed liberal feminism was the second wave which was marked by the recognition that women had specific identities radically different from men, and the way to liberation was through a glorification of cultural values attached to femininity. This narrative remained fashionable until the mid-80s, when arrived what was later called the third wave. As for the theoretical background of feminism, each phase was seen as the outcome of a more or less subordinate and usually unproblematic relationship with certain groundbreaking thought systems, to which the names of philosophical fathers were attached. Names that readily jump into one's mind, such as, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, for example. This version of western feminist history was unaware of its exclusion of the "other" woman whose stereotypes were so integral to the white woman's construction of herself.

One other assumption of the narrative is that feminism is a practice that lacks theory, therefore always requires authorisation by other theories, and desperately takes shelter in a master discourse. This view not only reduces the debate to one of deciding which theory feminism needs in order to advance its political practice but also overlooks the fact that any feminist confrontation with a body of thought has never been a simple matter of application or addition. As Claire Colebrook argues:

From its articulation in eighteenth-century liberalism to the present even the most faithful feminisms have questioned the efficacy of the theories that promised emancipation. Significantly, the questions feminists have directed to theory have rarely, if ever, been those of one secure body of thought relating to another. It is as though the ampersand between feminism and liberalism, feminism and Marxism, feminism and postmodernism, and so on, has always struggled to arrive at the second term, precisely because of the uncertain identity of feminism itself. Never a stable body of thought with a grounding axiom or system, feminism has addressed theory not merely in terms of what a philosopher might offer but also in terms of what feminism might become.¹¹

Such an interpretation of the history of feminism that emphasises its instability and uncertain identity not only disrupts the assumption of a fixed centre constructed at the expense of a multiplicity of centres, but also celebrates

¹¹ Claire Colebrook, "Introduction" to Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) p.5

feminism as a journey into uncharted territories. As Caren Kaplan brilliantly puts it:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new.¹²

A similar view is expressed by Braidotti whose articulation of nomadic feminism responds to the call for the creation of new cartographies, which provide empowering political fictions that do not necessitate a return to essentialism, but evoke new patterns of closeness without closure:

The new is created by revisiting and burning up the old. Like the totemic meal in Freud, one must assimilate the dead before one can move onto a new order. The quest for points of exit requires the mimetic repetition and consumption of the old; in turn, this influences how I see the points of exit from phallogocentric premises.¹³

Braidotti's nomadic subject is a politically informed configuration subverting the conventional representations of subjectivity. The inspiration for the image of the nomadic subject is the example of the people(s) that are literally nomadic, whose cultural experiences are, more often than not, shaped by forms of resistance against settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Throughout history the nomad has been the other of the settled, and it is only by way of that dichotomy that the settled has been able to assume a cultural identity, which is always external, oppositional, and retrospective. The image of the nomad as the model of a new understanding of subjectivity acquires significance as a subversive agent that helps to expose this oppositional nature of identity. In the context of the binary opposition constructed between the first and third world women, the former can be readily associated with the settled and the latter with the nomad to illustrate the oppositional relations involved in identity formations. The normative identity of the settled is always dependent on the existence of the nomad, whereas the nomadic condition is one, which is marked by a constant act of transition between physical states of

¹² Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: "The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse", *Cultural Critique* 6(Spring 1987): 194.

¹³ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 169

existence, between cultural experiences and socio-symbolic contracts that regulate thought and behaviour.

Although the nomadic mode of subjectivity is not an exclusively female territory, Braidotti sees sexual difference as "the question with which we late twentieth-century Westerners are historically bound to struggle".¹⁴ The first reason for this is the colonisation of the notion of difference by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking which creates "subcategories of otherness" meaning "less than" or "to be worth less than" the ethnocentric Western man who represents the norm. Following from that, sexual difference is implicated in this oppositional logic that Simone de Beauvoir once clearly exposed, by defining woman as the "second sex" in a move that set the foundations of feminism as a critical theory questioning the prevailing systems of Western thought and representation. For Braidotti, feminism as a critical philosophy challenges the belief in the "natural", therefore historically unalterable, structures of the system, and invites us to recognise the falsely generalised notion of the "universal subject". The feminist critique of dualistic ways of thinking puts to question the conflation of the masculine and the white with the universal. It allows us to think sexual discrimination as a result of the oppositional logic, which creates binary differences only to organise them in a hierarchical scale of power relations. The notion of the universal subject is exposed to be resting on a most particular and specific model that gives that particular the power of domination or exclusion over categories of people who are written off as "others" or "minorities".

Understood as a model for intersubjective relationships, the nomadic mode also foregrounds multiculturalism not only as a difference between cultures but also as a difference between the same culture, and within every self. The nomadic subject's relation to the other is comparable to that of the rhizome¹⁵, whose main characteristic is its ability to be connected to any other entity in its surroundings, during which process the boundaries get blurred and individual identities predetermined in oppositional relationships lose their meanings. In Braidotti's words, "The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all.

¹⁴ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 146

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) pp.3-25

Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections.”¹⁶ As such it has far-reaching political implications for the analysis of sexual difference in relation to other geopolitical and socio-historical concerns in terms of transnational and transcultural feminist links. In this respect, the nomadic identity envisioned by Braidotti easily translates into the category of third world women who can provide feminism with fresh insight into its politics of representation. In a move to deconstruct the apparently oppositional identities, the third world women’s view of western cultural practices can reveal similarities where difference is expected.

For example, how would a third world woman who has traditionally made an arranged marriage, which is, to a western eye, a sign of backwardness and an explicitly patriarchal way of oppression, react to the practice of marriage through dating agencies, and blind-dates in the West? Or can one find connections between the beauty myth and foot-binding? Or a contrast between breast-feeding in public being illegal in many western countries where women can walk around comfortably in low-cut tops, and its being viewed as natural in many countries where women are expected to dress modestly as required by their religion? One can go on citing examples that compare different cultural practices from what Spivak calls the “simultaneous other focus” that can contribute new theoretical perspectives towards a nomadic future for feminist politics. As Sara Ahmed maintains:

Explicit theorising is precisely about thinking through the necessity and possibility of social change. It is about justifying the decisions we make, the language we use, how we read, how we speak to each other, and the very forms of our political organisation. I ‘do theory’, not because I lack any immediate concern for ‘the political’, but because my concern for the political forces me to question the knowledges and formations of feminism itself – to question rather than assume what the identification ‘feminist’ will mobilise at all levels of political struggle. Theory does not suspend political conviction – it makes sense of it.¹⁷

As the new subject of feminism is defined as the site of axes of differentiation such as sex, race, ethnicity and class, and contingent upon the multiple and potentially contradictory experiences not only of different women, but also of each woman, one crucial problem arises. How can feminism theorise

¹⁶ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.35

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.18.

the instability of 'woman' as a signifier without losing sight of the over-determined relation between the signifier 'woman' and the real-life woman as an historically constituted and embodied subject? For Braidotti, "the central issue at stake here is how to create, legitimate, and represent a multiplicity of alternative forms of feminist subjectivity without falling into relativism." She then goes on to say that "the starting point is the recognition that Woman refers to a female, sexed subject that functions as a general umbrella term that brings together different kinds of women, different levels of experience and different identities."¹⁸ The long-term project of feminism, however, involves the unmaking of the process of identification with culturally available positions organised in the dichotomy of gender, through which Woman is constituted. The starting point for her theorising of a new model of female feminist subjectivity in a nomadic mode is an anti-essentialist understanding of the embodied subject "as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological."¹⁹ Therefore, feminist consciousness requires a critical distancing from the institution and representation of Woman because the "recognition of a common condition of sisterhood in oppression cannot be the final aim."²⁰ Rather her choice of the nomad as the model of a new feminist subject is suggestive of a journey through the multilayered structures of one's embodied self to a nomadic type of feminist theory, where discontinuities, transformations, shifts of levels and locations can be accounted for, exchanged, and talked about. So that our differences can engender embodied, situated forms of accountability, of story-telling, of map-reading. So that we can position ourselves as feminist intellectuals – as travellers through hostile landscapes, armed with maps of our own making, following paths that are often evident only to our own eyes, but which we can narrate, account for and exchange.²¹

¹⁸ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.162

¹⁹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.4

²⁰ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.163

²¹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.172.