

Representation and Essentialism

In her autobiography, *Meatless Days*, postcolonial feminist critic Sara Suleri recalls a female student at Yale asking her why, in a course on third world writing, she failed to give equal space to women writers. Because, she answers, “there are no women in the third world” (Suleri 1989, 20). Woman, the third world, and the third world woman, she wants to insist, do not exist. What she means, of course, is that they do not exist except in “a discourse of convenience” (id.: 20). The discourse of convenience is also one of convention and custom. In other words, third world women exist as products of language, and the exchange, circulation, and consensual acceptance of what we might call received wisdom. There is thus no authentic third world womanly self that lies (the pun be noted) awaiting discovery, just that which inhabits the language games, plots, and discursive regimes of the social world. Shuttling between those whose power, interest, and desire govern the terms of this discourse, the third world woman, the subaltern subject, disappears. Leading critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak captures this dynamic in her famous proclamation, the “subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 1988, 308). In Spivak’s summation, the “historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” is inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent (id.: 295).

There, in a nutshell, is the chief contribution of postcolonial feminist theory to the issue we have learned to formulate as the problem of the third world woman, or as the woman question. Problems demand solutions; questions answers. The ongoing preoccupation in theory and in practice with this question, this problem, has kept us on the hunt for solutions and answers. The search continues: *cherchez la femme*. Christina Crosby writes that nineteenth-century British thought was preoccupied with “the woman question” (Crosby 1991). The transformation of “the woman question” into “the woman of colour question” or “the third world woman question” points to an expanding *global* horizon for preoccupations and anxieties that surfaced powerfully first in a *domestic* European context. Victorian anxieties about the significance and rights of women developed in a complex and dialectical relationship with an imperial logic which sought to redeem “woman”, “native”, and “other”, even as it was

threatened and challenged by them. In our times, as Spivak observes, “the recoding of the *pouvoir/savoir* of women in globality is an immense field of study” (Spivak 1995, 12).

Important as it is in itself, “the woman question” also has immense value as a heuristic device that serves to reveal the ways in which a nexus of power, desire, knowledge, and interest collude in the production of scholarship and policies, about women to be sure, but no less in response to woman as a sign of difference. The problem of difference in the world has often assumed an emblematic shape in the idea of the “third world woman”. Revealed and concealed by language, the third world woman, constructed in a discourse of convenience and convention, is sometimes a globally commodified and circulated product to be appropriated for a host of special interests. In the world of difference, particulars give way to undifferentiated conglomerates. The terms “postcolonial”, “third world” and “difference” are sometimes conflated by those with the power of description, and one adds, self-description when it is convenient. The slide between “postcolonial” and “third world” goes remarked. In at least some of its usages, critic Aijaz Ahmad bluntly states, the “postcolonial is simply a polite way of saying not-white, not-Europe, or perhaps not-Europe-but-inside-Europe” (Ahmad 1995, 30). Invested with suggestions of “lack”, “underdevelopment”, and “difference”, the third world, by virtue of nomenclature if nothing else, stands in a clearly hierarchical relationship to the West. Spivak’s meditations on the female subaltern in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, later revised and modified, have spawned a series of critiques and responses that raise central questions in a discussion on women in globality, questions such as: “Who can speak and for whom?”, “Who listens?”, and “How does one represent the self and others?”. The questions that have arisen in the wake of the publication of this seminal essay point to heated issues of representation and essentialism, not least the relationship between the first world intellectual and the third world object of scrutiny.

Kum Kum Sangari argues that the term “third world” not only designates specific geographical areas, but imaginary spaces. According to Sangari, it is “a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single ‘underdeveloped’ terrain” (Sangari 1990, 217). Postcolonial feminist critics have had to

contend with the slippage from woman to an aggregate characterization of third world women as an undifferentiated group uncomplicated by the heterogeneity that characterizes their counterpart in the more developed world. Oppression is then seen as a third world preserve, and third world women reduced to objects of consumption for a developed world which can implicitly and complacently reaffirm its superiority to the rest as the "norm or referent" (Mohanty 1991, 56). Postcolonial feminist critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, and Sara Suleri have variously attempted to rescue the category of "third world woman" from formulaic fixity and invariability, stressing instead a contextual nexus of forces that requires a complex, nuanced analysis instead of "a homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness" (id.: 59). Along with postcolonial critiques about the flattening of difference into predictable shapes, postmodern theories of identity coupled with an understanding of "difference" as the hallmark rather than the exception of any categorical grouping have created an ontological crisis in knowledge production. And yet it is clear that it is hardly possible to dispense with the category of "third world woman" or others like it, in a bid Spivak might describe as "strategic essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 1996, 214), or with an investigation of the inequities that continue to impact women adversely.

How to walk the fine line between a reductive and predictable sort of essentialism and the continued need for representation? Spivak suggests that one might begin by understanding the two senses of "representation." The first is *Vertretung*, to tread in someone's shoes... Your congressional person, if you are talking about the United States, actually puts on your shoes when he or she represents you" (Spivak 1990, 108). *Vertretung* is thus closest in connotation to "political representation". The other mode of representation, Spivak suggests, is *Darstellung*. As she explains, "*Dar*, there, same cognate. *Stellen* is to place, so 'placing there'. Representing is thus done in two ways: by 'proxy and portrait'" (id.: 108). The upshot for those who worry about it, is that it is not representation that is no longer necessary or possible, but rather that a certain sort of uncritical and unreflective representation is no longer sustainable, if it ever was. Notwithstanding her own revision of many of the pronouncements made in the infamous 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's injunction still holds

true: "Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (Spivak 1988, 308). For all that one might agree to this responsibility, however, it has been challenging for scholars to maintain comfortably this double session of representation.

Public Policy, Colonial Logic, and Capitalism

When we hear politicians and development theorists declare that India or this or that third world country lives in many centuries at once, we are being alerted to the fact that various segments of the population betray a retarded relationship to modernity, that they have a less than reverential relationship to progressive time which is signalled by adjectives such as underdeveloped, developing, or backward. Colonial domination over the colonized typically manifested itself in control over its space and its time: in its command over space as usable land and territory, its products as raw materials, and over the colony's borders as administrative units (later to evolve into independent nations, often with colonially designated borders); and its regiment over the time of the colonized both through the production of their "negative history" (David Spurr's phrase), as well as through a reorganization of their time in clock and calendar units *and* as labour, a regulation of time by the workday, so to speak. Colonization and development share an investment in spatio-temporal reorganization as engines for manufacturing the identity of those thus governed. In colonial discourse it is the possibility of change within an enlightenment narrative of progress that provides the perfect premise for the *mission civilisatrice*. This early model for negotiating difference is one we might call that of proselytization based on the prospect of successful conversion to the ways and beliefs of what is perceived as the superior faith. In this, the proselytization model is not unlike the colonial one, which also invites the "non-believer" to "be like me [the colonizer]", except that it operates on the ambivalent additional proviso – "you [the colonized] can never be like me". Emulation of the ways of the colonizer only emphasizes the difference of the colonized, their modernity always incomplete, always behind that of the colonizer's. True faith in the colonial model leaves the converted forever in the waiting rooms of redemption, even as an informal sodality of a class of exploitative transnational elites

united more by economic interest than nation or religion dominates the world marketplace of economic and social capital. Its quest for the domination of the minds, hearts, and pockets of the unambiguously named "emerging markets" proceeds through the simultaneous introduction of democratization, making the link between economic and political liberalism explicit. Progress is thus defined by the attempt to bring the world into one system of symbolic desire characterized by capitalism and its valuation of high-paced transformation, over-production and over-consumption, and "development" or exploitation of resources. Suggestive of a "racism" beyond race, colour, religion, or culture, this formulation of a new world order points to an other for whom we have yet to find the right vocabulary.

The use of terms such as "developing" or "third world" is thus code for that country's or people's status as an unfinished nation or unfinished peoples, races, or segments of society. These differences appear fractally, not only as the difference between first and third world, but *within* them. Postcolonial nations and societies betray their internal hierarchies by identifying their "backward" populations, i.e. those who retard or resist the project of modernity and development. First world nations begin to identify segments of their own population (African Americans, welfare mothers, impoverished cities such as Detroit) as "third world". The refusal of the puritan ethic of capitalist values, of prosperity and the work ethic, can cast portions of the first world populations as temporally backward and thus spatially conflated with third world colonies. At the same time, those in the mostly third world can cast portions (usually very small) of its populations as a first world within the third world (the 51 billionaires in India making for the third largest contingent of the richest men [sic] in the world, for example). This ideological and class-based difference suggests that resistance to anti-colonial or capitalist logic could be the grounds for an alternative global feminist alliance.

Those, however, who resist the usual logic of development defined by a capitalist credo – the subalterns of the world, particularly women – "cannot speak" in the sense that they cannot be heard or understood because they speak in an outmoded vocabulary, a language inappropriate to this global moment and its logic. Caught within the available register of discourses, woman and her concerns have yet to find an audience even when she does speak. Issues that are directly

relevant to women's lives – unpaid wage-free labour in home-making or child rearing, the unrecognized and usually illegal labour of sex work, the pressures of family and society, and societal approval of self-sacrificing practices – fail to register meaningfully for policy makers. In the absence of theories that can account for the womb as a site of production or of wageless labour as work that warrants compensation, it is not surprising that contradictions abound in economic solutions to women's problems.

Transnational networks that determine policies for women are likely to be located not only in the first world but indeed in its representatives throughout the world, and so will even engage locals in the third world, but this network nonetheless carries the imprimatur and signature of the North, resplendent with traces of its economic primogeniture in the unfolding global history. In the name of transnationalism and global cooperation, the North can continue to determine the fate of the superexploited in the South, while also employing a similarly neocolonial logic in treating the woman question on a domestic national scale, in the case of welfare mothers in the United States for instance where race and class have been activated along with gender as markers of difference and engines of public policy. Global elites can thus collude to produce policies that betray an imperial logic that has yet to be supplanted in transnationality. The network of structures under examination wields enormous power and serves to bolster rather than to check and investigate contradictions and assumptions that underlie the thinking of those in each node within it.

The Global and the Local

Notwithstanding our differences and our political boundaries, within the context of transnationalism and its enhanced possibilities for the flow of culture, communication, labour, capital, and ideology, we live not in three worlds but one. It may be an internally striated world, but it is more interconnected than ever before. I take it for granted that while the temporal categories that typify the postcolonial paradigm are under serious investigation, no one would argue that historical development or time do not matter or indeed, that place does not matter. The question, then, is, *how* do time (history) and place (geography) matter? Those interested in reconfiguring area studies argue that the

world has changed under the aegis of the latest phase of capital, that areas were arbitrary units that never did offer the static unity that the cold war pragmatic objectives were forced to assume, that the regional interests of individual areas are much more likely to link cross-regionally than contiguously, and that the local is itself defined fundamentally by the global. Those who argue that locations matter, on the other hand, contend that it is important to study the vernacular and local conjugations of the global, that the local is the very fabric of global capitalism, that the local is not merely reflective of, but *is* global process, and indeed that new meanings and possibilities for political agency emerge in the very process of the movement of the global into particular locations, rendering a preemptive theory of globalization premature and inadequate. At the same time, however, epistemic violence continues in the increasingly dominant structural systems that continue to be vectored along the national interests of powerful nations (usually in the first world) with supranational coalitions (the first world in mostly third world emergent superpowers such as India and China).

In the final part of this article, I would like to discuss two case studies which illustrate the double mandate we must accept as post-colonial feminist scholars: first, we must struggle to understand the forces of global capitalism in a reckoning of the local; second, we must also contend with the “foxholes of history” (novelist Amitav Ghosh’s phrase) where the local retains its identity not so much as independent from global forces but as distinct within it, and demanding understanding on its own terms. These case studies also highlight the ways in which our so-called “knowledge” about the condition of women is already limited by forces that are global at times and local at others, and often overlapping.

The Subaltern Cannot Speak

I rely for my first illustration on a significant study on the impact of globalization on vernacular writing by women in India (unpublished talk entitled “The Dissenting Feminist Voice in a Globalised Marketplace”) by feminist publisher and critic Ritu Menon, whose publishing house, Kali for Women, was the first independent publisher to begin to highlight and broadcast women’s issues in India to a broad audience

that has often included international feminists. This study demonstrates how the forces of the marketplace control both the dissemination and the production of knowledge even when knowledge appears to be locally produced.

Her study demonstrates how the forces of the marketplace control both the dissemination and the *production* of knowledge even when it appears to be locally produced. She points first to the global primacy of English – with a billion and half speakers worldwide and official or special status in some 75 countries – and its threats to non-English language productions by women writers, not least because younger people are losing their mother tongues and, moreover, the reading habit in favor of television and other globally shared entertainment. The next time we come across writing by women from that part of the world, in their own words, so to speak, we might consider which words in which language they have cast aside before they began to write in a more marketable language for their experiences. All languages mediate, we might argue, but Menon then turns to the ways in which the market determines not only the language in which experience might be rendered but also what can be said. Market considerations, initially fulfilling the promise of broader dissemination, begin to exert pressure on women's writing. Menon laments the aftermath:

Gradually, literature that sensationalizes women's issues begins to replace the writing that earlier attempted to explore and lay bare the patriarchal structures within which women's lives are lived; while issues that women struggled to legitimize and bring within the parameters of the literary – rape, sexuality, housework and reproductive labour – are subject to market control.

Menon explains that “The greater part of feminist writing today – feminist defined in broad terms and encompassing theoretical and critical work; social science research; creative writing, and general interest non-fiction – is published by academic, university and trade presses, short on “politics” as we understand it in the movement, but long on marketing, financial capacity and sales.”

At the end of the day then, assuming that women writers should have the freedom to choose publishers who offer bigger markets and better publicity, for all the speaking there is still silence about everything that the market disallows. We might think of this as a kind of cen-

sorship we have not yet learned to recognize in that it muffles what can be said while encouraging women to speak. In other words, it celebrates a self that is the product of repression, control, and denial.

My second case study draws from my own study on HIV/AIDS prevention work in India. In this case, feminist groups (not quite a movement) work locally and in unexpectedly successful ways, operating on local, regional, and embedded knowledge, but their strategies cannot be easily translated into a global or even national discourse, nor disseminated successfully by it.

In the course of my investigation, I travelled throughout Tamil Nadu, the first site of a state-based HIV/AIDS prevention program funded by US government funds in India. It was no surprise to learn that although the suffering was distributed, women were bearing the brunt of the epidemic because of their vulnerability, their dependence, and social disenfranchisement. They were not only more susceptible for reasons of their physical and biological vulnerability to infection but also because neither the state, nor society, nor indeed the funding agencies were able to hear or understand their situation. Or if they heard it, they were not willing to confront the huge and often shared local and global problem of patriarchal sexism or a reality-blind moral Puritanism among international funders as well as local guardians of morality. Societal condemnation of sex work, persecution by police and other societal agents of illegal activities, and donor resistance to recognizing sex workers as legitimate recipients of understanding, aid, and relief conspired to compound their abjection. Local disavowal of the reality and problems of sex work, not least of which is societal complicity with it, underscored the alliance of global, statist, and patriarchal networks. Domestic abuse and violence toward women, their subjection to forced, unprotected sex legal unions, and the refusal by state and US-funded NGOs to address issues that intervened in local culture suggested that these issues lay, without acknowledgement, on the same spectrum as the problems that attend those who make a living from prostitution. State agents as well as NGO workers and funders, many of them men, many of them used to the advantages of a male-dominant societal structure, were not likely to challenge structures that were in their interest.

These problems colluded with a general reluctance to address the syndemic, societal, non-epidemiological problems that were fuelling the

epidemic, in part because funding agencies tend to work on a time-line and a calculus of measurable outcomes. The big problems – poverty; lack of infrastructure; insufficient nutrition; paucity of drinking water; vulnerability to infections among all sorts for men, women and children; lack of viable job opportunities (for women and men); concern for the vulnerability and bleak prospects of girl children translating into misogynistic practices such as early marriage or even female foeticide; the low social capital of women as unpaid house-workers; the diminished self-worth of men in a labour-rich, opportunity-scarce context; the pressure of scriptural and societal injunctions upon women to sacrifice their interests to those of the family and community – these are not problems that have a clear resolution or even clear shape as problems. Yet these were the problems that collectively conspired to render women particularly vulnerable. Women who face a bleak future and susceptibility to all forms of disease due to malnutrition and poverty are hardly likely to insist upon condom usage with unwilling male partners for fear of HIV/AIDS if it means that their or their children's next meal would be in jeopardy. Societal and cultural problems that disadvantage women are unlikely to be solved within a funding-cycle time-line. Nor indeed is it possible to measure reliably the impact of interventions designed to change societal attitudes not only because they must necessarily be long-term and developmental in every sense but also because cause (the remedy, solution, or intervention) and effect (change in societal attitudes) make for ill-structured and multiple factor experiments at best.

For several weeks during my travel through slum projects, tourist sites, rural clinics, and informal highway brothels, I repeatedly confronted the “woman problem”, diversely manifested as women described: forced prostitution by husbands; voluntary prostitution to feed children after abandonment by husbands and partners; forced and unprotected sex with partners, clients and, for sex workers, with police and government agents; domestic abuse across class divisions; pressure to abort female foetuses; societal surveillance; the inability to imagine alternatives; and even the advantages of untaxed, lucrative sex work over other more labour-intensive and less remunerative forms of employment. In the midst of this depressing panoply of rural, urban, and con-urban women's experiences, I came across two groups who were tackling some of the issues with admirable ingenuity.

The first group had decided to work on the problem of female foeticide in what was then considered the “capital” of the phenomenon, by embarking on an aggressive nutritional and vitamin-based regimen for pregnant women funded by a government understandably embarrassed by the “backward” practice of female foeticide. It may be worth noting that women were the ones who usually carried out this misogynistic practice usually after family pressure to undergo amniocentesis and abortion, but sometimes because of a preference among the women themselves for a male progeny, a “choice” that stemmed from their own low sense of worth. While most other interventions by the government focused on vocational training for girl-children to enhance their viability as productive economic units within the family, the strategy used by this group was not so much to preach to husband and wife in the family or to focus on economic viability alone as to create attachment to the foetus and a sense of care for her own body in the woman who would then resist termination of a female foetus identified through amniocentesis. Through this novel approach, the group had begun to report modest amelioration in the numbers, but it was unclear if the trend was sustainable or if the model could be successfully duplicated in other locations, especially without government funding for a costly nutritional regimen.

A second group of married women in a rural location had decided to ignore the problem of domestic abuse and forced, unprotected sex to focus on other issues such as water scarcity and the lack of infrastructure. They had decided to initiate a relentless letter-writing campaign directed to public development officials, exhorting them to build and repair roads, fix broken tubewells with hand-pumps which no longer pumped out groundwater efficiently, and to ask for a recognition not of their own problems as women but of the problems shared by the village. They had no funding for these “initiatives,” but had employed the help of a local NGO in locating the addresses of their government representatives. Over the course of some months, men who had resisted women’s participation in these groups and any resistance to their demands by beating and punishing them had begun to desist as they saw their own lives improved by women’s efforts on their collective behalf. Their grudging appreciation seemed to have translated into a transformation in the traditionally oppressive dynamic, with what durability we are not in a position to know.

These modes of resistance are neither Western nor Eastern or postcolonial as such. They are more accurately described as local in the sense that they could only happen in that way in that place at that time. I have been reluctant to write about these experiences in the past because I understand that anecdotal evidence is by definition undervalued, and because I had no numbers, no verification, no measure that could reliably translate into what development folks might call an “outcome”. Indeed, the solutions, if such they might be, do not even seem to respond in any causal way to the problem at hand in either case. And yet I realize that there are scores of instances of what I would call “unclaimed experiences” out there for which we do not yet have a language or understanding. I know that even when there can be enunciation when there is silence, and silence when there is speech. Even women with solutions – literate women with the vocabulary, the education, the talent, and the understanding (the women writers who supposedly *can* speak) in the first case study – come up against the woman problem in globality as they are silenced by the problem of the marketplace. Even women with problems – the women fighting female foeticide and domestic abuse without much education or resources (the woman who supposedly *cannot* speak) – seem to find solutions, sometimes by “misrecognizing” the problem. These situations do not easily “fit” our paradigm of anti-colonial feminist movements as such but they tell us something we can try to understand if we extend the notion of postcolonial resistance to what I have vaguely described as “colonial logic.” This logic includes a nexus of subscriptions based on some combination of race, sex, class, or capitalist ideology, and it is not easily named or described. What we know and how we know it extend into whether we can even know those things for which we have yet to develop a vocabulary. We come up repeatedly and in different ways against the epistemological limit that reminds us, “the subaltern cannot speak”.

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Educación popular, interculturalidad y descolonización

La construcción del sujeto de las transformaciones
sociales en los movimientos de mujeres

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¿Por qué hablar de educación popular, interculturalidad y descolonización en el siglo XXI? ¿Qué relación guarda esto con los procesos de constitución-autoconstitución de las mujeres en “sujetas” del cambio social en América Latina? ¿Acaso es válido distinguir mujeres de hombres a la hora de pensar el sujeto de las transformaciones sociales?, ¿por qué?

Estas serían algunas de las interrogantes elementales que podrían plantearse al situarse esta temática. Lo que se presenta como evidente para unas/os, no lo es – inversamente – para otras/os. Resulta conveniente por tanto, adentrarnos en las reflexiones comenzando por un sintético pero central esclarecimiento de los conceptos que encabezan/guían estas reflexiones.

Interculturalidad

Hablar de interculturalidad remite, de inmediato, a un ámbito de contradicción con los paradigmas predominantes en el pensar, el saber y el ejercer saberes hasta hace poco considerados únicos, verdaderos y eficientes. Hoy se atraviesa una crisis profunda en el terreno de las racionalidades construidas y acuñadas hasta ahora como las únicas válidas y vigentes. Frente a ella, la interculturalidad se propone reconocer el pluralismo de racionalidades y, consiguientemente, la diversidad de

saberes válidos, sin exclusiones ni jerarquizaciones. Y esto pone en cuestión el sentido y el contenido de la racionalidad única – *occidental* – predominante hasta ahora. Todo ello remite de modo directo a los creadores de una y otra propuesta de racionalidad, es decir, a los sujetos del saber, a los sujetos del conocimiento, a los sujetos de la transformaciones sociales (culturales, políticas, económicas).

Al incorporar la interculturalidad como elemento central de los planteamientos (políticos y organizacionales) de las organizaciones sociales, se señala de inmediato la existencia de senderos de cuestionamientos y propuestas de superaciones posibles a dicha crisis de racionalidad, aun estando en medio de ella. Es el tiempo que transitamos. Caracteriza un escenario de conflictos cognitivos, culturales, sociales, éticos y de valores, y en él ubico las reflexiones de esta ponencia.

La cultura, particularmente la dimensión cultural, cualifica las interrelaciones y nexos entre los distintos actores/as (clases, sectores sociales y políticos) que conforman una sociedad y ocupa – por ello – un lugar significativo. Pero, ¿qué entender por cultura?

Las definiciones acerca de lo cultural y la cultura – concepto clave subyacente y transversal a toda reflexión en esta dimensión –, son diversas, amplias y no siempre convergentes entre sí. Sin intención de adentrarme aquí en las implicaciones que el seguimiento de uno u otro modo de conceptualización entrañaría, señalaré – como referencia, con un criterio operativo –, que cuando me refiero a cultura, aludo, en primer lugar, a los modos de vida de las clases, sectores y actores sociales y políticos, y a sus posibles interrelaciones, interinfluencias e intersignificaciones, es decir, también a los intersticios interculturales compartidos – de modo consciente o no – por los seres humanos que integran una sociedad dada.

Cada modo de vida está avalado/referenciado a su vez, en un “sistema de creencias, valores, costumbres, conductas y artefactos compartidos, que los miembros de una sociedad usan en interacción entre ellos mismos y con su mundo, y que son transmitidos de generación en generación a través del aprendizaje” (Plog y Bates 1990 en Malgesini y Jiménez 1997, 64).

En tanto viva y diversa, la cultura de una sociedad no puede considerarse una resultante de la adición de las partes, es decir, de las producciones materiales o simbólicas de los distintos sectores, clases o actores sociales. Lo medular de la cultura es intangible e invisible, es

parte del mundo interior de los hombres y las mujeres que la producen, reproducen y comparten, y sobre el cual moldean, aprehenden y acuñan sus hábitos y costumbres, base de sus interrelaciones humanas. Es por ello que – desde este lugar –, la cultura, a la vez que se produce, se reproduce e internaliza individualmente, y al ser socializada, compartida y resignificada en forma permanente en las interacciones sociales, resulta un proceso radicado en una dimensión eminentemente social y diversa.

En las sociedades latinoamericanas esta comprensión de la cultura implica, desde el vamos, el reconocimiento de la existencia de múltiples culturas que coexisten en un mismo territorio considerado “nación”, “Estado”, “país”, etcétera. Teniendo en cuenta que hasta el presente, desde tiempos de la conquista y colonización de América, se construyeron e instituyeron jerarquizaciones, subordinaciones, sometimientos y exclusiones entre las culturas, con predominio hegemónico de los remanentes de la cultura europea asociada a los poderes locales, resulta evidente comprender que la relación entre los miembros de las diversas culturas que viven en un mismo territorio (país) es de raíz compleja. Cuanto más intensa sea la cadena de subordinaciones y exclusiones, más complejas y conflictivas tenderán a ser sus interrelaciones (entre desiguales).

Como señala Miguel Argibay (2003), entre las características de las culturas vale destacar que:

- Toda cultura tiene historicidad.
- Toda cultura es pluricultural.
- Toda cultura es compleja.
- Todas las culturas son dinámicas.
- Ninguna cultura está exenta de contradicciones.
- Todas las culturas son heterogéneas.
- Cada cultura está sometida a influencias internas y externas.
- Las culturas en contacto se influyen mutuamente.

Es por ello – en síntesis – que la construcción de una mirada (y gestión) intercultural de la realidad social y sus alternativas se apoya – entre otros –, en estos supuestos y busca potenciarlos y desplegarlos.

Vivimos en sociedades profundamente desiguales, polarizadas, regidas por democracias construidas en función de los intereses de las

élites poseedoras del dinero, constituido por ello en único medio para (comprar) ejercer los derechos. Se trata de sociedades construidas sobre la base de exclusiones y explotaciones históricas de las civilizaciones precapitalistas que habitan este continente desde antes de la conquista, situación que se suma a exclusiones posteriores de razas traídas para la esclavitud desde África o China, a discriminaciones por rechazo al mestizaje, y también a la condición de trabajadores/as. Estas identidades sojuzgadas han sobrevivido constituyendo/preservando sociedades e institucionalidades (como es el caso de las institucionalidades indígenas), que coexisten de modo yuxtapuesto y, en cierta medida articulado, en estado de conflicto, resistencia y lucha de sobrevivencia permanentes. Todo ello entra en ebullición en el actual volcán latinoamericano, alimentando la explosiva cadena volcánica global.

La necesidad de defender la vida, la sed de dignidad, de justicia, de reconocimiento de identidades y pueblos sumergidos, marginados, explotados y oprimidos, irrumpe con fuerza y se hace visible en el accionar de nuevos actores sociales y políticos que disputan, condicionan o conquistan gobiernos en varios países del continente, destacándose, muy particularmente, la realidad actual de los pueblos originarios de Bolivia y su gobierno.

Esta realidad alimenta los debates acerca de la equidad, el pluralismo, la democracia, las relaciones de género y el poder. El enfoque cuestionador de las relaciones de género resulta central para la búsqueda de caminos que pongan fin a la desigualdad, abriendo cauce al reconocimiento de las diferencias, llamando a valorarlas positivamente, es decir, sin que su reconocimiento se utilice para justificar diferencias de acceso o ejercicio de derechos para unas y otros. El concepto género, que alude siempre a relaciones sociales de poder entre el varón y la mujer, no oculta las diferencias propias de los sexos, pero no les adjudica a ellas el carácter de limitación o beneficio que culturalmente el poder patriarcal machista ha incorporado a cada identidad de sexo, construyendo una muy engañosa (y útil a sus intereses) identidad cultural sexo/género, que hizo y hace de las mujeres sujetas inferiores, discapacitadas sociales para el ejercicio pleno de la ciudadanía.

En la dimensión de interculturalidad, el concepto género resulta también, a la vez que útil, increpado por la diversidad. Ciertamente en Latinoamérica es cada vez más incorporado por las mujeres indígenas en sus luchas y capacitaciones, pero lo es desde las propias identidades

culturales de las mujeres indígenas. No se corresponde con “estudios” de ONG’s sobre las mujeres indígenas, sino con y de las mujeres indígenas. En realidad, más que estudios, se trata de rescatar y resignificar prácticas y los actores y las actoras de las mismas. Como bien señala Pérez Conguache, lidereza indígena Maya comprometida con el trabajo de género: “Creo que no se trata de venir y hablarle a las mujeres de proyecciones y metas, sino de dar aplicabilidad a esa retórica desde mi casa; y mi familia.” (Lizarazo 2006).

Al hablar de género y de conciencia de género es vital por tanto enfatizar su carácter multidimensional, multicultural, y su correspondiente pertenencia (contextualización, marca, diferenciación) étnica y cultural. Es vital abrir las visiones e identidades de género desde el punto de vista de la multi e interculturalidad y desarrollar metodologías que permitan descentrar la mirada etnocentrista (occidental) que prevalecía (y todavía prevalece) sobre las mujeres del resto del mundo y particularmente sobre las mujeres indígenas, promoviendo acercamientos que recuperen la posición estructural junto con la agenda y la construcción de protagonismo político de las mujeres desde sus propias culturas.

Esto implica también romper con la idealización respecto de la existencia de un supuesto y homogéneo “sujeto feminista” (*sujetas* del cambio). La interculturalidad en el género devela la construcción de subjetividades alter correspondientes a las diversidades culturales, imbricadas también con la cultura hegemónica con la que debaten permanentemente y en cuya interrelación van fortaleciéndose, definiéndose, madurando y proyectándose.

Actores y actoras sociales se forjan en las situaciones de lucha y resistencia, con el agravante (en el sentido de profundidad) de que las mujeres adquieren en el debate social la pronta conciencia de la dimensión sociocultural desnudando el componente del poder que haciéndolas *sujetas* iguales de las penurias, luchas y construcción de alternativas, las hace a la vez *objetas* en el ámbito de la representación. (Ver ilustración en página final). Las mujeres acceden a la representación sociopolítica a cuentagotas, y pocas veces las que lo logran tienen conciencia de género.

Esto recuerda la multidimensionalidad del concepto género: entre culturas y feminismos, entre relaciones de poder patriarcalmachista que se expresa en disputas de espacios de poder, desarrollo y disfrute humanos entre varones y mujeres. Como señala Pérez Conguache:

“Los hombres no ven el potencial y la importancia de nosotras, gracias a eso la figura femenina se queda en casa y no significa gran cosa, pero igual ves que ella es la que trabaja día y noche; y a la luz pública no realiza ninguna labor digna. La mujer es la encargada de todo, incluso del liderazgo pleno del proceso productivo, reproductivo y complementario del hogar. // De igual forma es cierto que no desarrolla sus habilidades totalmente aunque tenga mucho deseo de superación, pues en la sociedad existen barreras que le impiden tener acceso a la tierra, a la toma de decisiones y al involucramiento en los procesos; por eso es necesario la unión y el respaldo de género para salir adelante.

“(…) nosotras las mujeres necesitamos un espacio donde podamos estar y contarle al mundo que existimos, que somos víctimas, pero luchadoras y sobre todo que como indígenas tenemos responsabilidades sociales y familiares muy importantes, por tanto merecemos un respeto especial y esencial para criar a nuestros hijos. // También creo que la formación y la educación cívica y política le permiten a la mujer estar en los puestos de decisión, involucrarse con los espacios donde se puede luchar junto a los hombres por los derechos colectivos y de género. (Lizarazo 2006).

Esto destaca un elemento muy presente en las culturas indígenas, resaltado por las mujeres con conciencia de género: la complementariedad. El género entraña la lucha cultural contra el poder patriarcal machista, pero de ello deben también tomar conciencia los hombres del presente porque, de no hacerlo, se corre el peligro de multiplicar la fragmentación y cultivar antagonismos secundarios, en vez de avanzar en la formación y maduración de actores y actrices políticos hacia la construcción del actor colectivo, sujeto (plural) de las transformaciones sociales. Este sería un segmentado camino que contribuiría a la profundización de las fracturas socioculturales desviando las luchas, focalizadas en tal caso en combatir el machismo de los hombres de carne y hueso del presente, olvidando que ellos – en tanto portadores/defensores de sus privilegios y situación de poder –, son simples instrumentos movilizados en función de los intereses milenarios de los poderosos que también a ellos los oprimen y explotan. En este caso, como en todos los de los oprimidos/as, a las mujeres nos cabe – para liberarnos – liberar a los varones. Y ello solo puede hacerse de conjunto, varones y mujeres.

Esto es así porque la mirada de género busca abrir caminos que pongan fin a todo tipo de opresión, sometimiento y subordinación, pro-