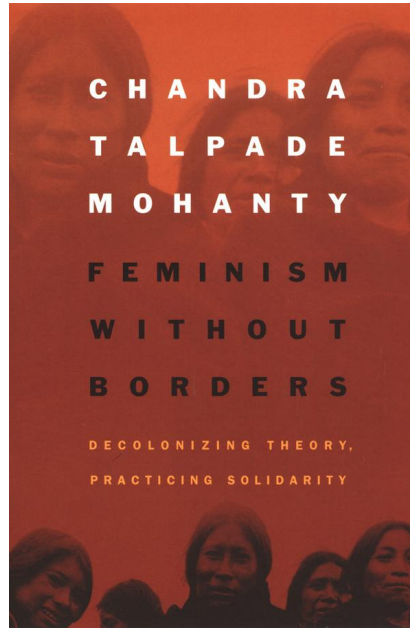


## Feminism Without Borders

### The Danger of Believing in Universal Sisterhood

Mohanty, C. T. (2007). *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Longueuil, Québec: Point Par Point.



Review by: Samantha Elaine Groulx

The identification as a woman has political consequences in the world we live in. Depending on a woman's economic and social marginality and privilege, she will bear unjust or unfair effects. No matter where we are located, the interweaving processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism is integral to our social fabric. We may share collective struggles, but we do not share collective stories. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory,*

*Practicing Solidarity*, feminist scholar and activist Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes on the danger of assuming a 'collective sisterhood.' Staying true to her first feminist publication from 1984, 'Under Western Eyes,' Mohanty drives home the same message – that there are fundamental, problematic directions within U.S.-based feminism.

*Feminism Without Borders* offers a critique of Eurocentric and Western developmentalist discourses and the racial, sexual, and class-based assumptions of Western feminist scholarship. The novel is split into three sections: decolonizing feminism, demystifying capitalism, and reorienting feminism. Mohanty's train of thoughts on politics of differences and solidarity, the relation of feminist knowledge and scholarship, decolonization of knowledge, and theorizing agency flow beautifully throughout her writing in the context of feminist solidarity. Mohanty takes an alternative route to ending her book; instead of providing a conclusion, she opens up a map in front of us, with new possibilities and avenues to be explored.

To clearly understand Mohanty's message and call to action, her feminist vision must be interpreted. Feminist work, to Mohanty, must be anchored in decolonization and commitment to anticapitalistic critiques and antiracist feminism. The feminist practice operates at three levels: daily life through everyday acts that create our identity and community. The level of collective action in groups and movements around the feminist vision of social transformation. The level of theory and textual creativity in scholarship and writing practices of feminists engaged in knowledge production. Textual strategies deployed by Western feminists in cross-cultural studies construct a consistent image of developing world women as always victimized and unrelentingly oppressed by their cultures. According to Mohanty, these profoundly flawed analytic and methodological approaches distort understanding of the various types of agency developing

world women carry. They hold agency in not only their resistances but also in the potential for cross-cultural feminist alliances.

In her book, Mohanty distinguishes three issues with the directions of U.S.-based feminisms. The first is the growing class-based rift between activist feminism and university-based feminism. The U.S. academy has led to a kind of careerist, academic feminism. Feminism has become a way to advance academic careers, rather than a call for fundamental and collective social and economic transformations. The second is the deepening of consumerist and corporatist values, fueling the rise of neoliberal and free-market feminisms, concerned primarily with women's advancement up the corporate and nation-state ladder. The focus on financial equality between men and women is grounded in the capitalist values of profit, competition, and accumulation. Additionally, it assumes that U.S. corporate culture is the norm and ideal that all feminists should strive for. Lastly, the third problem is the narrowing of feminist policies and theory, which defines to be the result of a critique of the hegemony of postmodern skepticism and identity.

Mohanty brings attention to the strategic location of the category 'women' depending on the context of analysis. Western feminist texts have produced the developing world woman as a singular, monolithic subject. Western feminists see themselves as active agents of history, as individuals who are liberated, educated, and free, through the objective status they impose on their 'sisters.' What Mohanty implies in this argument is that the one enables and sustains the other. Western feminism has based the life of a developing world woman on her gender and her being developing world – poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victim, and so on. In contrast to this, Mohanty writes on Western women's feminist self-representation as educated, modern, having control over their bodies and sexuality, free to make their own choices.

These assumptions place women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions. These categories imply a notion that can be applied universally and cross-culturally. This thinking as 'proof of universality' completely lacks critical analysis. The representation of Global South women circumscribes our understanding and analysis of feminism as well as the daily struggles women engage in these circumstances.

Mohanty highlights the importance of analyzing and theorizing difference in the context of feminist cross-cultural work. There is no doubt that the universality of gender oppression is problematic. Understanding women as a cross-culturally singular, homogenous group with the same interests, perspectives, and goals, and similar experiences effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between developing and developed world women. The everyday, fluid, fundamentally historical, and dynamic nature of developing world women's lives cannot be collapsed into a few frozen indicators of their well-being. The commonality of interests shared by Global South women is based not in biology, color, or geography but in shared history and experiences of struggles against racist and colonial domination.

The distinction between Western women and developing world women is made based on privileging a particular group as the norm. Mohanty exposes the power knowledge nexus of feminist cross-cultural scholarship expressed through Eurocentric, falsely universalizing methodologies that serve the narrow self-interest of Western feminism. This political presupposition is underlying the methodologies, the current model of power and struggle that they imply and suggest. A cross-cultural feminist has to be attentive to the micropolitics of

context, subjectivity, and struggle and the macropolitics of the global economic and political systems.

Sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism all underlie and fuel social and political institutions, which leads to the further hatred of women and 'justified' violence against them. Many feminists think they are not personally racist or sexist, but we all are clearly marked by the burden and privileges of our histories and locations. Race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and colonialism embody histories and experiences that tie us together. These categories are interwoven into our lives. Our lives are structured by economic, political, and cultural factors. All women are engaged in the process of adjusting, shaping, resisting, and transforming their environment. Mohanty calls for Western feminist scholarship to challenge the situating of itself and examine its role in the global economic and political framework. In no way is Mohanty trying to undermine the importance of the pathbreaking and essential work Western feminists have done. Rather, she emphasizes the interconnections between developed and developing economies and the profound effect it has on women's lives in all countries. When writing on women in the Global South, Western feminists must be considerate of the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship. This includes the production, publication, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas.

For these reasons, Mohanty drives home the point that it is not merely enough that one should have a voice, but rather concerns how the voice is the result of one's location, both as an individual and as part of a collective. Women's representations correspond to real people, often standing for the contradictions and complexities of women's lives. Our world is complex, but attempting to open up and understand these complicities is worth the struggle. Each of our identities is what connects us to one another.

Alliances between Global South and Western feminism cannot be built based on universalizing sisterhood but must instead be on the basis of politically constituted, context-specific organizing, informed by an understanding of internal hierarchies and differences among women. Through anticapitalistic transnational feminist practice, Mohanty believes there is great possibility and necessity to build common political projects between these two groups. *Feminism Without Borders* calls for the radical decolonization of feminist cross-cultural scholarship. A transnational feminist practice depends on building feminist solidarities across the visions of place, identity, classism, belief, and so on. Mohanty's points remain relevant and pertinent today as when she first wrote her essay '*Under Western Eyes*'. She stresses that the most expansive and inclusive visions of feminisms need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them – hence *Feminism Without Borders*. As Mohanty quotes from Irma, a Filipina worker in the Silicon Valley, “the only way to get a little measure of power over your own life is to do it collectively, with the support of other people who share your needs” (p.168).