
REVIEWS

Uma Narayan. *Dis/locating Cultures/Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 226p.

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This book is an impressive intervention in a field that has meanwhile come to be known as “postcolonial feminism” — a field inhabited by theorists and critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri, Trin T. Minha-ha, Lata Mani, Kumkum Sangari, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among many others. Postcolonial feminism offers a wide range of theoretical and historical approaches, dwelling upon various complex constellations of concerns. Yet, perhaps, some of its general contours are well-exemplified in its persistent critiques of Western imperialism and its problematic representations of the “Other.” Also, postcolonial feminism radically and strategically situates the Third-World female “subaltern” in an attempt to complicate and contest the dominant feminist (in Spivak’s words, “hegemonic feminist”) narratives produced, packaged, and circulated from the metropolis. Various enacting its confrontational politics and praxis geared towards social change, postcolonial feminism confronts and contests unequal *power-relations* and *production-relations* on both local and global scales. Narayan’s book can certainly be located in this very contestatory tradition within which it raises some crucial questions and concerns at a time when globalization is continuing to perpetrate epistemic-cultural-economic violences on the discursive and material spaces of the Third-World subaltern.

Neatly divided into five chapters respectively titled “Contesting Cultures,” “Restoring History and Politics to ‘Third World Traditions,’” “Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and ‘Death by Culture,’” “Through the Looking Glass Darkly,” and “Eating Cultures,” the book begins by interrogating the author’s own location and position as a “Third-World feminist.” Such a self-critical interrogation begins to complicate the very question of identity itself in ways in which the continuing “colonialist” process of constructing “Third-World” identity and also even the practice of conjuring the ghost of authenticity haunting that very identity (as exemplified in various brands of counterproductive, essentialist identity-politics these days) are all brought into productive crises. For Narayan, indeed, the question of identity continues to constitute a predominant concern throughout the book. And her insistence on historicizing and contextualizing

identity and difference within the deeply specific *national* contexts — instead of just celebrating or, worse, *fetishizing* them — seems right on the mark. According to her, the fetishization of difference and identity only renders them vulnerable to ongoing hegemonic appropriations in the metropolis.

Related to the question of identity is the very question of “representation” itself — a crucial issue that Narayan engages at some length in the second chapter of her book. In the Nietzsche-inspired post-representationalist domain of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, the question of “representation” is not merely caricatured but is decisively dispensed with — or even declared dead — on the very assumption that representations are no longer possible in the way that the signified is now impossible. Spivak — as well as Marxist critics like Aijaz Ahmad from India — already advanced critiques of such poststructuralist post-representationalism, dominated as it is by the despotism of the signifier. Narayan of course does not dispense with the question of representation as such, but rather confronts it through zeroing in on the very problematic of representations themselves from the perspectives of feminist colonial discourse analysis. She states: “My aim ... is to explore representations of ‘Third-World traditions’ that seem to replicate what I shall call a ‘colonialist stance’ toward Third-World cultures, to explain why these representations are both problematic and ‘colonialist,’ and to describe other representations of ‘Third World traditions’ that present a very different picture of what these ‘traditions’ are” (43).

With the above end in view, then, Narayan ably enacts a historically engaged postcolonial hermeneutic in an attempt to read and deconstruct the representations of the “‘Indian tradition’ of *sati* or widow-immolation” (43) in mainstream Western feminist discourses and particularly in Mary Daly’s book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Narayan thus contests the very ahistorical colonialist power/knowledge networks of Western feminism that tend to epistemologize and ontologize — rather fix and freeze — the entire “Indian culture” as being “patriarchal” *vis-à-vis* the practice of *sati*. Indeed, in her preoccupations with the question of *sati* — which has hitherto constituted a crucial site of contestation and intervention in postcolonial feminist theory and colonial discourse analysis — Narayan seems to be sharing some of the positions already articulated by Gayatri Spivak and Lata Mani in their respective ground-breaking works on *sati*, their different approaches notwithstanding.

Narayan’s preoccupations with the problematics of the representations of *sati* in Western feminist discourse indeed remain intimately connected to other representationalist discursive areas, namely dowry-murders in India and domestic violence-murders in the United States — issues that she takes up in the third chapter

of her book. Narayan takes a hard, critical look at the ways in which dowry-murders in India are framed, focused, and even formulated in US academic feminist discourse, while pointing up the dangerous problems kept alive by Western *culturalist* epistemological approaches to Third-World subjects, identities, traditions, and cultures. She argues that while crossing “borders” in the age of globalization, images, narratives, and the entire chain of events pertaining to the Third World lose their national and historical *differentia specifica* under the homogenizing epistemic logic of some readily available connection-making apparatuses. As Narayan further argues, such apparatuses — informational, ideological, and mediatic as they are — continue to provide visibility to dowry-murders in India and relative invisibility to domestic-violence murders in the US, thereby serving the hegemonic.

But, at the same time, Narayan, in her fourth chapter, finds the notion and construction of an “Authentic Insider” (143) — meaning that only the Third-Worlders can really represent the truth about the Third World itself and criticize it — equally problematical. For, as she argues, the construction of such an “authentic insider” gets strategically pressed into the service of the anthropologizing “information-retrieval” project of the West — a project that does not merely reproduce and reinforce what Narayan already called a “colonialist stance” but also serves certain versions of Western multiculturalism today. Narayan is of course justly critical of such multiculturalism which, as she suggests, merely accentuates the imperatives to know and embrace “other cultures” so that the other can be readily assimilated into the dominant cultural program. Indeed, in her analysis, then, this kind of multiculturalism turns out to be a neo-liberalist code-word for an old-style racist and sexist assimilationist politics and program.

The concluding chapter is instructively devoted to “observations about the links between curry, colonialism, and Indian identity” (163). It is in this context that Narayan introduces and engages the notions of what she calls “food colonialism” (162) and “culinary imperialism” (162). Also, she proceeds “to think about the social meaning of ‘ethnic food’ from the perspectives of immigrants to Western contexts, arguing that discussions of multiculturalism and respect for Others must focus not only on relationship between ‘mainstream citizens’ and ‘ethnic others’ but also on the complex relationships between various minority ‘ethnic’ groups” (162). Thus she does not merely problematize what might be called a *cook-book approach to other cultures*, an approach which still retains the legacies of old-style colonialism in the very practice of metropolitan multiculturalism itself, but also suggests how the history of colonial-imperial power/knowledge networks, variously subalternizing Third-World identities and cultures, has not reached its end.

While the book, overall, is interventionist in its agendas and interested more in critiques and *problematiques* than in theory-building, while of course it is stimulatingly informed by a whole range of postcolonial cultural-studies approaches, I think the book clearly lacks an engagement with the metropolitan political economy of the production of “Third-World” identity, difference, and representation. Perhaps this lack has to do with the general — if not exclusive — indifference of postcolonial theory to the problems and analytics of political economy. Although Uma Narayan justly takes up a whole constellation of intertwined issues thrown up by contemporary globalization and migration, she does not seem interested in seeing how the racist and patriarchal logic of global/corporate/late capital continues to homogenize, de-historicize, and de-nationalize “Third-World cultures” in the interest of value and profit on both local and global scales, thus perpetrating violences on the land, labor, language, and the body of the Third-World female subaltern. For instance, multiculturalism itself is not merely culturalist but is also decisively politico-economic, connected as it remains to the flow of corporate capital. Of course, in all such contexts, the law of value does not wither away. This particular lack notwithstanding, I think *Dis/locating Cultures* is a welcome intervention not only in feminist and postcolonial studies but also in the areas of cultural and media studies, historiography, and the social sciences. ✨