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“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” - Simone de Beauvoir

While female categorizes people according to biology and reproductive organs, woman is based on a collection of generalized assumptions that are attached to the identity. Many issues arise when sweeping generalizations of womanhood are made; it perpetuates notions of women’s universal victimhood, excludes the experiences of many marginalized women, and, most importantly, lays the foundation for a toxic hierarchy between the First World Woman and Third World Woman. All in all, the hierarchy resulting from the Western conceptualization of “woman” has facilitated the emergence of the savior complex that is so prevalent in mainstream feminism.

To understand this, it is necessary to first outline the ways that Western feminist literature and theorization have created the identity “woman,” which is based on false assumptions of women’s universal oppression. At the core of this presumed universality lies the Western idea of a male-dominant patriarchy, one that controls every aspect of women’s lives, as described in Nancy Hartsock’s “The Feminist Standpoint.” Hartsock argues that the goal of feminism should be to develop a feminist epistemology that delineates a method of constructing effective knowledge from insights of women’s experiences. At first glance, this appears to be an inclusive proposal. However, she attempts to use certain aspects of stereotypical, middle class, white, American womanhood as a valid template for the female experience, even in global contexts where it does not fit; this is problematic. Most notably, her argument is rooted in a universal sexual division of labor; she argues that the sexual division of labor that confines women to the domestic sphere results in the double day, a lifestyle in which women are constantly producing use value goods in the home (Hartsock 295-296). While this is true for many white, middle class, American and European women in heterosexual marriages, this theorization is largely based on the power dynamics produced by capitalism and whiteness, thus ignoring the realities that many other women face. The real-world implications of all of this are demonstrated clearly through the lived experiences conveyed in the documentary “Paris is Burning” and further dissected in bell hooks’ “Is Paris Burning?”. In the documentary, poor trans people of color aspire to perfectly convey womanhood in everything from their voices, to their clothing, to the way they walk on the ballroom floor. But the subtext here is that what they really aim to portray is middle/upper class, white womanhood. As hooks puts it, “colonized, victimized, exploited, black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom and pleasure” (hooks 149). White womanhood has become the standard, even for the people that it excludes.

In defining the identity of “woman,” the identity of “mother” often becomes the basis for further theorization; this presents more instances in which marginalized women’s experiences go unacknowledged. Take Nancy Chodorow’s work, for example: she outlines how the “crucial differentiating in male and female development arises out of the fact that women, universally, are largely responsible for childcare and for (at least) later female socialization” (Chodorow 43). According to Chodorow’s theorization, it is through a mother’s instruction and the observation of a mother’s position in the nuclear family that girls are socialized into being women. While this may be true in many middle-class, Western contexts, the key word in the previous quotation is

“universally.” In the nuclear family model, women have no economic role and motherhood is devoid of close kin relationships with other women. But the basis for all of this, the “nuclear family” which Chodorow refers to so often, is entirely Eurocentric! In traditional West African families, for instance, rigid gender roles are nonexistent, mothering is not “a privatized nurturing ‘occupation’ reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children [is] not the exclusive responsibility of men” (Collins 45). Rather, in these communities, childbirth creates mothering networks which are the complete opposite of the isolated, domestic motherhood that Chodorow and Hartsock describe. This is also true for Black families living in the West: mothering and female socialization take different forms in these communities because the “nuclear family household” – off of which mainstream theorization is based – is a structure that many Black families cannot afford to uphold (Collins 43). Although Hartsock theorizes that women are united through a domestically oppressive identity that transcends race, class, ethnicity, etc., for a long time “African-American women have been compelled to work outside the home, typically in a very narrow range of occupations” (Collins 44). While many middle class, white, American women are socialized through the lens of a Western hierarchy in which their work is solely domestic and thus viewed as valueless, African-American women have always been expected to leave the domestic sphere and work. These expectations of self-sufficiency, combined with the interconnectedness of the Black mothering community, create an environment where Black girls grow up surrounded by Black women role models who promote values such as community and female economic independence (Oyèwùmí 5-6). Thus, “universal” aspects of socialization – such as the female oedipal crisis that Chodorow proposes in her work – do not occur in the same way for most American black girls as they do in American white girls. Frankly, theorists like Chodorow and Hartsock believe they are detailing the lives of women, when in fact they are only detailing the lives of middle-class, white women. Making broad theories based on one specific version of women’s lived experiences – and more importantly, claiming that these theories can be applied universally – is an injustice to the feminist cause. While they may not be oppressed by the same capitalist patriarchal structure, marginalized women are oppressed in other ways, ways that are overlooked due to Western theorization about what it means to be a “woman.”

In all, Eurocentric views of womanhood and motherhood – although extremely exclusive in nature – are promoted as “the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom and pleasure” (hooks 149). So, if this ideal white, middle class, First World Woman is the epitome of joy, freedom, and pleasure, then what is the Third World Woman? This question is central to understanding the transnational hierarchy of womanhood.

Now that it has been established that the mainstream feminist construction of the “woman” identity is problematic in both its implied universality and its roots in women’s oppression/subordination, it is crucial to understand how this idea of womanhood creates a platform for the dangerous notion of a single “Third World Woman,” specifically a Muslim “Third World Woman.” Here lies a contradiction: while mainstream feminists push to foster a sense of transnational sisterhood, they also (perhaps unintentionally) create a stark divide between women in the First and Third worlds. This occurs through Western feminist scholarship; a hegemony which promotes mainstream feminist work allows for the solidification of narratives of the overly oppressed Third World/Muslim woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty captures this perfectly in “Under Western Eyes,” which looks into specific demonstrations of discursive colonialism by dissecting the language and implications of Western, feminist scholarly works that perpetuate the stereotype of Third World Women’s constant victimization: “In these texts,

women are defined as victims of male violence...victims of the colonial process...victims of the Arab familial system...victims of the economic development process..." (Mohanty 338). This type of scholarship exists as the result of a combination of preconceived notions about patriarchal oppression and the colonial imagination. The hegemony facilitates this process by allowing mainstream, Western feminists to craft a Third World Woman identity with little understanding of these women's lived experiences, religions, interpersonal relations, etc. Lila Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" addresses colonial appropriation, the process that enables mainstream feminists to assert that all Third World Muslim women actually want to be saved. The framework that fosters this viewpoint is that of "modern" Western vis-à-vis "traditional" Muslim. This mindset impedes First World/non-Muslim women's ability to listen for the sake of truly understanding, rather than simply imposing uninformed, mainstream, feminist interpretations of systems of oppression that victimize other women. For example, colonial discourse frames "Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives"; thus, in accordance with the colonial imagination, the Third World Woman and the Muslim woman must be the opposite: helpless and overly oppressed (Mohanty 353). It is through this flawed logic and lack of understanding of others' lived experiences that mainstream feminist scholarship is able to write about the Third World Woman using language like "third world difference," "underdevelopment," and "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights" (Mohanty 352).

Western feminists are given the power to both write the story of the victimized Muslim woman who is unaware of her rights and judge her religion according to Western (mainly Christian) ideologies. The colonial discourse that frames Western women as secular and liberated leads to blanket statements like "Muslim women are oppressed through the practice of veiling," suggesting that the lack of veiling in Western contexts represents freedom and sexual autonomy. These assumptions are made without understanding the reasons for veiling, implications of veiling (or not veiling) in these specific geographic/social contexts, and what the experience of veiling is really like for the women who do it. In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?", Abu-Lughod refers to anthropologist Hanna Papanek who describes the burqa as a form of "portable seclusion," which many Pakistani women find liberating because it allows them to "move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men" (Abu-Lughod 758). The veils – considered "mobile homes" – demonstrate women's "belonging to a particular community and participat[ion] in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women" (Abu-Lughod 758). In this instance, women felt that veiling offered them safety, helped them stay true to their cultural/religious values, and gave them a sense of belonging. So, the covering of a woman's face or body is not necessarily a repression of freedom; in fact, for many Muslim women it is a source of freedom. But because "legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards," mainstream feminism determines which practices – such as veiling – are oppressive (Mohanty 351).

Although most likely rooted in good intentions, Western, feminist scholarship has resulted in a superiority complex which is reflected in First World feminists' outreach to Muslim Third World women. A prime example is many upper class/wealthy, American feminists' passion for saving Afghan women from the Taliban's oppression in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, the Feminist Majority Foundation – a non-profit advocating for gender equality and women's economic empowerment – launched a campaign against the Taliban's brutality

toward women; this later led to the official Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan campaign. The campaign made headlines; American feminist publications began constantly publishing articles on Muslim women's suffering under the Taliban; Hollywood celebrities advocated for the movement en masse, making large donations to "raise awareness" for Third World Muslim Women. Attempts at political activism were made all in the name of so-called "Third World solidarity." And this movement was different in that "even skeptics who are normally leery of Western feminists' paternalistic desire to 'save Third World women' were sympathetic to the Feminist Majority's campaign" (Mahmood et al. 340). Why? The Taliban's treatment of women reflected a type of blatant gender-based, physical, and economic violence different from the subtly sexist policies commonly discussed in feminist literature; it seemed more extreme than practices such as veiling or gender-segregated schools. Due to this, "[t]he Taliban in many ways [has] become a potent symbol of all that liberal public opinion regards as grievously wrong with Islamic societies these days, proof of the intense misogyny long ascribed to Islam" (Mahmood et al. 340). The mental connection between Islam and the policies of extremist groups like the Taliban is a strong one; thus, this situation implied that the Feminist Majority needed to not only save these women from the Taliban, but that the organization needed to save them from Islam. Through this process, First World feminists morphed "the Taliban is oppressive toward women" into "Islam is oppressive toward women." The problem here is not that First World Women desire to use their privilege to aid other women, rather, the problem lies in the religious generalizations that the situation enabled.

Overall, veiling and the "Muslim Woman" provide valuable insight into the ways that a Eurocentric "woman" identity combines with uninformed preconceptions about oppression in other communities – and leads to First World feminists' fixation on saving the Muslim Woman. As an extension of the assumed notion of universal patriarchy, First World feminist discourse frames Third World women as perpetual victims without a deep understanding of their lived experiences. Not only does mainstream feminism neglect to include the experiences of many marginalized groups, but it is also mainstream feminists who are allowed to write the story of the "Third World Woman," describe the roots of her oppression, and outline the ways that she can be "saved."

Further, the First World feminist savior complex is largely based in a shallow historical view of the sociopolitical contexts in which Muslim/Third World women live. While wealthy American feminists readily advocated for and donated to campaigns fighting the Taliban's gender violence, they engaged in very little introspection regarding the ways that they themselves contributed to – and benefited from – a society that enforced the very circumstances that oppress these women. This is a perfect example of a larger phenomenon in mainstream feminism: even when First World feminists make an effort to understand marginalized women's individual lived experiences within their local contexts, they rarely acknowledge the ways that mainstream feminists themselves directly contribute to the oppression of the women they are trying to save.

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