

Feminist futures, feminist pasts: An intersectional reflection on where we are now

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We cannot talk about the future of feminism without talking about the past. I have been a feminist for some 40 years, ever since I came to Britain in 1970s as a young woman from Trinidad. This was a heightened time for feminist activism, but I had never heard of Indian women Suffragettes until a few years ago when I stumbled upon a crumpled photograph in a dark corner of a museum. Suddenly like a ray of light, I saw myself in history! I discovered a hidden genealogy of feminist women of color in the West! Yet in contrast to the activism of white British Suffragettes, these Indian women were described as no more than exotic multicultural creatures in colorful saris. Gayatri Spivak, the post-colonial critic, calls this erasure and reconstruction of colonial history an ‘epistemic violence’ in which white women are seen as the only legitimate agents of struggle and ‘third world’ women are mute, visible objects.

But let us fast forward now to 2015 when the film *Suffragettes* (Sarah Gavron, 2015) was released to mark their Centenary. At the film’s launch the female cast, headed by the actor Meryl Streep, wore T-shirts emblazoned with Emily Pankhurst’s famous quote, “I’d Rather be a Rebel than a Slave”. This thoughtless, racist publicity stunt was an insult to the descendants of the enslaved who did not ‘choose’ to be a slave and whose fight for freedom was not supported by many Suffragettes. For them, rebellion was to be ‘human’ and stay alive. This Suffragette story shows us how feminism is fraught with intersectional tensions. Whose voice, whose platform do we hear? How is women’s ‘difference’ recognized and acknowledged? There is a strong thread of colonialism that runs through mainstream feminism – or should I say ‘white’ feminism? In the

21st century we still have to ask, 'if feminism is now anti-racist, intersectional and inclusive then why do we still need 'black' feminism?' Maybe because it is not!?

Intersectionality is at the heart of black and postcolonial feminist theory. Cut us open and you will see our multiple identities where race, gender, class, sexuality, religion nationality, age, and disability bleed into one woman's life. As a young black woman recently told me, "intersectionality runs through all of us". Intersectionality enables us to reveal, from the standpoint of our embodied lived lives, how oppressive systems of power work through our sexist, racist, classist institutional structures. For example, the racialised state surveillance of Muslim women who wear the veil, and are subject to state anti-terrorist violations of their human rights. The #Say Her Name vigil for Sarah Reed who was beaten by the police and later died in a British prison highlights the systematic state sanctioned violence against women of colour.

However, while intersectionality is a 'life line' for black and postcolonial feminists of colour, it has become a 'buzz word' for white feminists - a political concept devoid of any real meaning. To claim an antiracist position by simply declaring, 'we are inclusive... We are having an intersectional event', you 'tick the box' of intersectional *doing*, but it does not fundamentally challenge your underlying *thinking*. Recently at a mainstream white women's political meeting they declared they were an intersectional party. They regaled us with middleclass feminist concerns about equal pay, women in the board room, and childcare. A young black woman party activist asked what the meeting may offer her mother – an older, retired, migrant black African woman. An embarrassing silence followed, finally we were told they had made a special trip to a tough urban 'ethnic' area. However, the black women who came to their meeting were so angry the white female politicians cried and ran out of the room! This is why black and brown women get angry! They are excluded and so get angry, which in turn reinforces the white expectation that they are 'angry and difficult'. This justifies their exclusion as they are seen to bring 'bad feelings' into the room making white women feel guilty and bad!

The white women activists in the meeting however did not feel 'guilty or bad' about championing the campaign against FGM (female genital mutilation) and honour killings. The 'saving' of oppressed Muslim women from barbaric patriarchal customs 'out there' in far off places, is 'safe ground'. This reaches back to the colonial idea of the superiority of white Western civilization. In the zeal of these missionary acts of 'saving others' we forget to look at the poverty, mental health, destitution, and sexual violence women are universally subjected to right here on our doorstep in Europe!

As we go forward in 21st Century we need to think about what feminist *solidarity* really looks like and how to be a better *ally* to women who are ‘not like you’. The enemy, patriarchy, is greater than the sum of our feminist parts. We need to keep our ‘eyes on the prize’ and build a truly universal, inclusive feminism that keeps in its sights how patriarchy cleverly ‘hides in plain sight’ behind the neoliberal illusion of greater gender and race equality. This new terrain of struggle is very different from 100 years ago when the Suffragettes were physically excluded from centres of white male power. We need new strategies for new times and I am heartened by a generation of hopeful, confident feminists whose strident cyber critiques of neoliberalism aims to expose the continuing inequalities of race, class and gender in all its manifestations. The feminist movement is vibrant, the feminist movement is global!

Filmography

Gravon S (dir) (2015) *Suffragette*. Ruby Films, Pathé and Film4 (prod).

Author biography

Heidi Mirza is Professor of Race, Faith and Culture in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Professor Mirza's work focuses on gender, race, faith and culture using a postcolonial and black feminist theoretical frameworks to explore equality and human rights issues for Muslim, Black and minority communities. She has published extensively on race, gender, Black British feminisms, multiculturalism, postcolonial theory and educational inequalities. Some of Professor Mirza's work include: *Young, Female and Black* (Routledge, 1992), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (Routledge, 1997), *Race, Gender and Educational Desire: Why Black Women Succeed and Fail* (Routledge, 2009), *Black and Postcolonial Feminisms in New Times: Researching Educational Inequalities*, co-edited with Cynthia Joseph (Routledge, 2010), *Respecting difference: Race, faith and culture for teacher educators*, with Veena Meeto (Institute of Education, University of London, 2012). In her recent research Professor Mirza explores current debates on multiculturalism and diversity, as well as cultural and religious difference, Islamophobia and gendered violence.