

Leela Fernandes

Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, Power

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In *Transnational Feminism in the United States*, Leela Fernandes argues that American academic feminists, particularly in the field of women's studies, frequently employ a transnational framework to discuss women's issues around the globe. However, their transnational framing not only recasts "the subtle historical legacies of colonial images of inferior others" (1), but it also ultimately does not transcend the nation-state paradigm, because it is continually shaped by the US-centered vision of the world (2). Fernandes contends that the production, consumption, and dissemination of knowledge about other cultures and places in US curricula and academic research "discipline" interdisciplinary fields of studies, such as women's studies, and scholars risk reproducing the social hierarchies they aim to disrupt. In the book, Fernandes "unsettle[s] the nationalization of the paradigm of transnationalism" and discusses "the possibilities and the limitations of interdisciplinary knowledge on international, global, and transnational issues" (9). In so doing, she offers a timely critique of the ways the transnational feminism framework is usually employed in scholarly research and classrooms in the US.

After laying out her arguments in the introduction, Fernandes unsettles the frameworks of transnationalism and interdisciplinary knowledge-production through different topics in the subsequent five chapters of the book. In chapter 2, she discusses the ways "the US 'war on terror' has reworked the question of transnational human rights" (30). She illustrates that there is a long history of liberal feminists making claims about using human rights to advance gender equality around the globe. Local NGOs also often use human-rights language to address women's issues. However, Fernandes argues, this language renders non-Western women "victims" who need saving by Western international actors. Liberal feminists' approaches to advancing global rights also make the American state invisible (masking imperial power and global relations of inequality) despite the fact that postcolonial feminists have critiqued the universalistic language of global human rights (35). Furthermore, a framework of human rights and the politics of national security are closely linked; the United States continues to be at the center, and the national and transnational (regions of wars) are produced simultaneously. Because of these concerns and linkages, Fernandes writes, the paradigm of the nation-state remains firmly in place

while still allowing transnational feminism (conceptualization of women's rights as human rights) to be institutionalized in the American academy (59–60).

In chapter 3, Fernandes focuses on a key aspect of globalization--the transnational circulation of cultural products (film, media images, literature, and so on)--as it is linked to the notion of difference and the politics of representation. She argues that although political economy usually shapes the production and circulation of cultural forms, the representation of the subaltern is further complicated because it travels across national borders. To illustrate the complexity of subaltern representation, she analyzes two sets of cultural products: the film *Bandit Queen* and the autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi*, on the one hand (and in more depth), and the film *Slumdog Millionaire* and the fictional book on which the film was based, *Q&A*, on the other. She argues that since the film *Bandit Queen* situates Phoolan Devi as a victim of her inferior caste and gender, it reinforces the idea of ossified difference and links "Indian society with a failed attempt to reproduce universalistic narratives of democracy and modernity" (70). The film circulates well-known images of "third-world" culture such as child marriage, caste-based segregation, passive villagers, and violence against women, while casting Phoolan Devi as an exceptional woman who rebels against her traditions. The film *Slumdog Millionaire* similarly relies on the imaginary familiar to its Western audience, focusing on homosexuality and child abuse coded through poverty to reproduce the notion of difference. The "normal" Indian society thus is constituted as a contrasting image to the West, she writes: corrupt and violent, failing to live up to Western standards of progress and democracy. As these problematic cultural productions travel through a transnational framework (economic conditions and representations), they illustrate the politics of knowledge-production and the ways a transnational paradigm has been institutionalized.

In the next chapter, Fernandes analyzes the manner in which a transnational framework has been employed in feminist research, namely the way it has come to insist that "there are new and distinctive spaces, sites, practices, and discourse that cannot or should not be grasped within the analytical lens of nations and states" (103). She argues that within this paradigm, transnational feminists focus on the epistemological dimension to knowledge-production of the subaltern, but they ought to take a broader approach. It is not only about the epistemology (how we know about the subaltern), but also about the ontology (the materiality of knowledge of the subaltern), and the practice (the realm of ethical/political agency) (105). For example, she writes, the contemporary, global, gendered division of labor (outsourcing businesses and employing female workers) is a continuation of previous state policies. This realization, Fernandes argues, should compel transnational feminists to make connections between the multilayered dimension of knowledge-production and how it is connected to ontological and ethical realms when engaging in research that focuses on the subaltern.

In chapter 5, Fernandes continues to discuss how the paradigm of transnational feminism overlooks ontological and ethical dimensions of the representation of the subaltern by examining its institutionalization in the field of women's studies. She argues that although there is a tendency in women's studies to focus purely on gender or women in transnational courses, this penchant risks inadvertently reproducing colonial representations of the other as the United States remains at the center. To avoid such a simplistic juxtaposition, she suggests providing students with some depth of context--of place, history, and culture--to grapple with the nuance of

issues women face globally. Fernandes recognizes that women's studies departments have limited resources (faculty and course frequency). However, she asserts, if "knowledge about democratic and socialist revolutions in the West is necessary for an adequate comprehension of the genealogies of (Western) feminist theory, it is precisely this kind of knowledge about specific places and contexts that students need to acquire *before* they can learn about, let alone theorize about, women or feminism in contexts that they are unfamiliar with" (150). Such context is usually absent in women's studies classrooms, Fernandes contends, and students are not adequately trained in how to gain ontological understanding of the world beyond the United States. Such training would involve rethinking feminist pedagogy's insistence on personal self-expression and experience. To break from an institutionalized, US-centered, transnational feminism in the classroom, Fernandes argues, students need "not a space to focus on the self and on personal experience but the ability to learn how to suspend their own selves" because "worlds matter on their own terms" (166).

In the last chapter, Fernandes argues that the dominant US models of multiculturalism have "disciplined" the field of women's studies. She pays close attention to the "wave" paradigm of feminist movements in the United States: since transnational feminism is placed within the "third wave" of feminism, both in scholarship and classrooms, this late coming "is cast as one more minority identity to be included within the field of women's studies," and "haunts interdisciplinary feminist thought" (168). Drawing on works by women of color that appeared during the "second wave" of feminism, Fernandes disrupts the paradigm of successive "waves" and argues that "courses for women's studies rarely present multiple histories of feminism that emerge simultaneously in comparative contexts" (182). This miscasting obscures the fact that scholarship by women of color often does not present a simplistic progression of feminist thought, but produces a distinctive form of consciousness and new spaces and sites of thought and practice (180). Nonetheless, linking transnational feminism with globalization, and usually teaching it as an "upper-level 'specialized' course reinforces this presumption that feminism in 'other' places is a later development or 'wave'" (182). This temporal division, she writes, misplaces transnational feminism, maintains the nation-state paradigm, and disciplines interdisciplinary knowledge-production.

Transnational feminism has gained currency in American academia particularly since the 1990s. Fernandes's book thus is timely and offers a constructive critique of the paradigm and the challenges scholars face in their works and classrooms. Yet the book is dense, her chapters long, and her arguments complex--all of which make it difficult for instructors to assign it in classrooms. This may limit her readership, despite the fact that this is precisely the audience that would benefit from her instructive work. Offering further concrete ways for how to incorporate the ontological and practical dimensions of the transnational paradigm into women's studies and interdisciplinary courses might have helped her readers to reconsider the established pedagogies, as well as more adequately approach the transnational feminism framework. With these caveats, scholars who employ this framework in their research and curricula will find Fernandes's critiques useful. Her work will help them realize how transnational feminism has been influenced by the dominant language of human rights. Fernandes's observations regarding "disciplining" transnational feminism through the US-centered vision of the world should also alert them to the ambiguities and risks of reproducing imperialism in the classroom and research. The book thus

sharpens a critical sensibility on how to study women's issues globally. It should spark healthy intellectual conversations among scholars who utilize a transnational paradigm.