

Postcolonial and Decolonial Thought in Feminism and Analyses of Othering Representations

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On August 9, 2010, the TIME weekly magazine came out with its cover featuring the now iconic photo that was to win the highest award in the World Press Photo international competition. The photograph taken by South African photographer Jodi Biebers is a dolorous portrait of a young Afghan woman named Bibi Aisha, whose husband had cut off her ears and nose in punishment for leaving the house.¹ Attempting with her desperate flight to escape violence she faced from the relatives with whom she cohabited, Aisha nevertheless failed to evade the ensuing brutal attack unleashed later on by her husband. Bibi Aisha allegedly saw her posing for this photograph as a chance to draw attention, by way of showcasing her injury, to some of the manifestations of violence exerted by Afghan men on their wives. In fact, the main news report of the magazine to which Bibi Aisha's face is supposed to draw attention described in detail the dire situation of Afghan women in a country just barely recovering from a military conflict while dealing with the consequences of a rigid religious-political as well as gendered—in this context—dictate. With all of that set against the backdrop of the gradual departure of US military forces from the country, the news report poses the question as to what would be the consequences of such withdrawal for Afghan women. According to TIME, there were well-founded fears that President Karzai's regime would no longer pay heed to the issue of women's

¹ Available from: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20100809,00.html>, accessed Oct 13, 2017.



rights afterwards as the presence of US forces in this regard served as a stabilising element.¹

While the news report attempts to make a respectful approach showing the Afghan women as agents of their own lives—and while the brutality itself of this particular story is unsettling, the article still relies on the paternalising, orientalist narrative, challenged by postcolonial and feminist theories, that effective help must come from the outside, that is from the so-called Occident and that the “oriental woman” cannot reasonably expect it to come from within her country. We do not, of course, question the gender violence taking place on real level in cases like the one mentioned above; what is problematic here from the point of view of postcolonial feminisms is the impact of the generalised image of women in the “Orient” or the “Third World” as passive victims unassertively waiting to be rescued. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasised, such a generalised image may have a negative effect on precisely those women against whom gender violence is committed since this may give them the impression that they are fatally helpless.² It is also significant, genderwise and culturally that is, that this kind of western stereotyping of the Orient occurs through women’s bodies, or rather through their exoticising representations. Although Aisha’s face is disfigured after the assault, the photo on the cover of the magazine still meets the usual European or American expectations of what the “Oriental” Muslim woman “typically” looks like. Bibi Aisha has a purple scarf covering her black long hair, with her garment richly decorated around the neck with silvery ornaments. Yet the portrayed woman’s gaze in the lens is determined—this is what makes the image defy stereotyping; through her injury, she communicates the power of a woman who refuses to be a victim. Hence the photograph is ambivalent: it depicts a woman, victim of a violent act, but her gaze shows her resolve not to allow this experience to define her whole life. Grounded in this interpretation, the depicted woman does not feel to be a mere “object” to be rescued; while silent, she is nevertheless a silent warrior who wants to be the agent of her own life.

However, the implied interpretative ambiguity is totally dismantled by the headline of the above-mentioned news report, as it overrides the possibilities of an empowering reading of the photograph pushing it back to the established, orientalist and false saviour narrative. It asks the following: “What happens if we leave Afghanistan?” And since the suggestive headline is superimposed over Aisha’s portrait, it excludes in advance all answers other than the exclamation: “The Taliban men will brutally cut noses to Afghan girls in scarves!” Through the composition of the said cover page, the

¹ Baker, A. “Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban.” *TIME*, 9. 8. 2010. Available from: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2007407-1,00.html>, accessed Oct 13, 2017.

² Mohanty, Talpade C. 1984. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *boundary 2*, 12: 3; On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism, pp. 333–358.

TIME weekly magazine thus exploits, in the context of today's global capitalism and the ongoing war conflicts, the most radical, othering orientalist stereotypes inherited from the colonial era, the result of which are notions of—quoting Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak here—“white men rescuing brown women from brown men.”³ Postcolonial critique may thus ask whether Bibi Aisha's attempt to address violence against women is in the above-described setting fashioned by the TIME magazine represented befittingly and successfully, or whether her portrait is perhaps instrumentalised for other political purposes. Since physical violence had already been committed against Aisha, could it be perhaps reproduced through representations, symbolically that is? How do such representations shape up or simplify the notions of (Afghan) masculinity?

A similar kind of questioning or critical reading of media, literary, artistic and historical representations is what this newly released monothematic issue titled *Postcolonial and Decolonial Thought in Feminism* seeks to present. The intention to produce this thematic issue of the *Gender and Research Journal* is linked with the MA programme Postcolonial Studies from a Gender Perspective, which we have run jointly at the Department of Gender Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University since 2010. Initially, it was Blanka Knotková-Čapková who conceptualised the course in 2005 in the same place. Both the course and the monothematic issue are based on the knowledge that postcolonial thought and critique in the Czech context is represented predominantly through the curricula of philological, or rather literary theory-related disciplines, which examine the culture and history of countries with colonial and colonisation heritage and legacy respectively, and also (albeit not in all colleges) in fields such as anthropology, philosophy and political science. Thus, postcolonial studies are largely presented on Czech academic grounds as being just one out of many analytical schools, and a minority one at that. Although the list of disciplines that do work with the concepts of postcolonialism is relatively long, the gender perspective is either completely nonexistent or it represents an outright minority topic. The relative unfamiliarity with postcolonial studies in Czech academic space is also echoed by the fact that the founding work of this discipline, Said's *Orientalism*, was not translated into Czech until 2008, three decades after it was published for the first time. Hence the recent publication of *Postcolonial Thought I-IV* anthologies by Tranzitdisplay, reviewed by *Gender and Research* in an earlier issue, is a highly commendable initiative, as well as the Czech translations of other canonical postcolonial studies authors such as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, and the collective publications in Czech—*Mimo Sever a Jih. Rozumět globálním nerovnostem a rozmanitosti* (*Beyond North and South: Understanding Global Inequalities and Diversity*)—edited by Ondřej Horký-Hlucháň and Tomáš Profant and published by the Institute of International

³ Spivak, G. C. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Nelson, C., Grossberg L. (eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, p. 297.

Relations. Despite these efforts, postcolonial studies are still marginalised in the Czech Republic. We should not nonetheless see the root cause for this in a historical given. The fact that the Czech Republic, or Czechoslovakia for that matter, is not traditionally perceived as a colonial power does not in any way mean our society has not assumed “colonial” approaches to its “Others”.

Postcolonial themes could, of course, be explored from the other end too, namely from the point of view of to what extent the Czechoslovakia under the totalitarian regime lived through the experience of domination similar to that of a colonised land. Neither these overlappings of postcolonial and post-totalitarian identities, nor emancipatory aspirations (or the question of whether they are at all present here and to what degree) have so far drawn in Czech settings the analytical attention they deserve.

Postcolonial studies are embedded in the historical reflection of colonialism and imperial politics, deconstructing the power relations between the dominating and the dominated, primarily in the area of cultural representations, while taking into account the political, economic, social and other relevant contexts. Geographic and cultural roots then play a role in identifying the so-called decolonial thought; although the theoretical and methodological starting points reflect the methods of the postcolonial “school”, decolonialism is a prominent concept associated with the Americas, primarily Latin America. This epistemological project, which has only begun to advance markedly in the past two decades, is emerging from the historical specificity and heterogeneity of the entire continent. The “production” alone of the terms such as decoloniality, decolonialism, etc., accentuates situatedness and agency while standing in opposition to the prevalent notion in postcolonial texts, namely the idea of the subject silenced through discourse. However, both approaches are complementary and mutually supportive, and of course, they are highly interdisciplinary and sensitive to a variety of intersections; they are analytical instruments.

Postcolonial/decolonial and feminist critiques identify with Foucauldian notion of discourse and language, these being entities that do not reflect (or not only reflect) reality, but produce it (as well). Language as an elementary and at once systematic means of representation is not an unbiased instrument of classification, but a constitutive element bearing power connotations and an ideological baggage in the form of value hierarchies, often associated with gender, race, class, religion or language affiliation. This is also the case in the realm of literature (and oral tradition), i.e. in an area which language is an inherent part of and which is directly addressed in three of the six articles of this issue; the three remaining ones have a rather interdisciplinary bent. Texts (in the broadest sense) are part of all key social institutions, and therefore play a cardinal role in defining cultural and political authority, in (former) colonial centre and in (former) colonies alike, where they can serve to strengthen the status quo with regard to androcentrism and/or colonialism. Texts, be it literature, spoken utterances,

institutionalised codes, laws, films, paintings, or any other artistic representations, are not, of course, the exclusive domain of the metropolis, and may thus be the bearers of resistance anywhere, as the latter is the inherent effect of colonial discourse.⁴

In this context, one should also add that colonial domination and resistance against it do not form a simple relationship between an internally homogeneous metropolis on the one hand and an internally homogeneous colony on the other. Metropolises and colonies may get colonised in an inward direction too—this is what was happening and is still going on even in the post-colonial or decolonial periods respectively. Any state or any society can behave in a colonial manner towards its own minorities, which is a subject matter that is dealt with in particular in the current article zeroing in on the Finnish context.

Feminist theories and postcolonial/decolonial studies have common intersections of interest, dealing with topics such as the contents and forms of representation and essentialisation, marginalisation, oppression, and resistance against it, as well as relations of domination, searching for and finding one's voice, location and epistemological privileges, questions of agency, the possibilities of constructing identity at a given place and time, or its performance and negotiation. Like gender studies, postcolonial theories place emphasis on interdisciplinarity and intersectionality. The fundamental prerequisite of postcolonial analysis conducted from a feminist perspective has always been the reflection of the interplay of androcentrism and colonialism. In the disciplinary field of history and/or social sciences, it is also quite fruitful to link the studies of nationalism, national identities, overlappings and intersections of different categories of identity (national, cultural, social, gender, sexual, physical, religious, human-nonhuman, etc.) as well as the conceptualisations of identity within their respective frameworks as fluid, border-informed or performative.

In accordance with the teachings of postcolonial/decolonial theories on the need to create space for traditionally marginalised voices, our call for papers was sent out to academic sites around the world, i.e. outside the former colonial centres too, primarily to Latin (and more specifically Central) America, as well as Asia and Africa. As a result, the articles contained in this issue cover Latin American and European cultural-geographical spaces. The journal's monothematic issue is opened by the theoretical text by Romana Radlwimmer, which examines the differences between postcolonialism and decolonialism by analysing the central concepts of two distinguished women of letters and personalities of Latin American, or rather Chicana feminism, namely María Lugones and her take on the colonality of gender, and Gloria Anzaldúa's terms *Borderlands* and *Nepantla*. *Borderland*, in this case the Mexican-American border, is a space that significantly determines the phenomena analysed in the following two essays. Based

⁴ Loomba, A. 2005. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 149.

on the memoirs of Mexican-American writer Reyna Grande, Marion Rohrleitner shows, with regard to the DREAMERS generation, and the successive policies of the last two US Presidents, how the idiosyncratic Latina/o literary genre—*testimonio*—allows both to communicate traumatic experiences from a family torn by migration and subsequent negotiations of multiple identities in a new homeland, and to contribute to a possible social change. Hence, the feminist concept of *testimonio* appears here to be an activist and empowering literary genre. Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová's article analyses the hybrid representations of the three most important female characters of the Chicana/Mexican cultural heritage, revealing their protean identities in the creative works of Chicana women writers. The shared, albeit quite differently experienced (and culturally interpreted) experience of motherhood reveals the identities of three historical, or better mythological women as highly fluid, changing and complementing each other, transcending into the living reality of today's Chicanas. Edla Eggert's article focuses on the Brazilian context. While we have discussed written texts so far, Eggert also examines a woven text. Woven fabrics are the product of the artistic pursuits on the part of female weavers, as well as a means of interpreting their own act of weaving as an activity traditionally associated with femininity, which, however—as Carolyn Heilbrun noted—is a parallel to finding new, empowering narratives.⁵ In her research, Eggert demonstrates feminist practices that derange the boundary between the researched and the researcher, and giving voice to women allows them to address hitherto unrecognized experiences. Although Europe is usually associated with the centres of colonisation, Viola Parente Čapková states in her article that the centre is internally diversified and has its "inner" Other(s). Parente Čapková, as mentioned above, looks at the example of Finland, which was both a colonised land and is, at the same time, a colonising country, when it comes down to its relationship to the Sami and Roma minorities. The author shows how the theoretical and methodological starting points of postcolonial studies are reflected in the Finnish approach to studying Finnish as well as Sami literature—and unsettle the notion of a nation being a monolith. The last article in this issue is Kateřina Kolářová's text. It uses the apparatus of postcolonial theories—in particular the concept of coloniality—applying it to the area of disability studies.⁶ She demonstrates,

⁵ Heilbrun, C. 1990 [1985]. "What was Penelope Unweaving?" Pp. 103-111 in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁶ In the Czech context, disability studies is a considerably new discipline, with one of the first scholars pursuing it being Kateřina Kolářová. The name of this discipline has been translated inconsistently so far; Kolářová herself scarcely makes use of the often-used designation "disability studies," favouring "otherness" or "disadvantage" studies instead. These designations turn attention away, in a thought-provoking fashion, from a "disabled person" toward a society that does not respect his/her physical or any other kind of otherness, and through its lack of attention to these othernesses puts his/her chance to live a full life at a disadvantage.

employing selected “clinical” cases of “mental retardation” and their subsequent media and film representations, the functioning of the affective policy of abandonment in the post-socialist context. These articles are accompanied by two reviews concerning African-American studies and black feminist criticism penned by Karla Kovalová and Tereza Jiroutová Kynčlová. Next, another piece summarizes Blanka Knotková Čapková’s observations from Indian academic–predominantly literary scientific–conferences that had a feminist orientation, addressing the issues of postcolonial types of oppression, relations, and identities. Beyond the scope of the monothematic issue is Tomáš Profant’s review outlining the main propositions of the collection of Bruno Latour’s texts in Czech *Stopovat a skládat světy s Brunem Latourem. Výbor z textů 1998-2013 (Tracing and Assembling Worlds with Bruno Latour)*.

On a concluding note, we would like to thank all the reviewers whose feedback helped us to hone the submitted papers, and Zuzana Uhde, Editor-in-Chief, for her support and help. Without her logistical competence, this issue would not come to see the light of day.

We believe that with this special monothematic issue and joint endeavour we will be able to bring (not only) into Czech scholarly debate gender-motivated questions related to postcolonialism/decolonialism, that is, to the combined influence of androcentrism and the consequences of colonial dominance. As the articles suggest, these questions are not limited to the traditionally understood scope of political colonialism in the sense of annexing foreign territory and the metropolis-and-the-colony relations solely in the international context. The issues of the dominating and the dominated have a global character today, they surround us everywhere, it is not simply some remote legacy of colonialism as a historical phenomenon, which has little to do with the Czech Republic and has supposedly been surpassed. It is advisable that we should identify their present, more subtle and often-not-so-obvious-at-first-glance forms and link them with the effort for social change. This is necessary also because the current capitalist system continues incessantly to exploit and reproduce global historical inequalities. Reflecting on the different forms of oppression is what might assist such a change. As far as the submitted articles are concerned, the main objective is to draw a connection with the gender aspect and to pinpoint the so far underrated (or underscrutinised) lens of examining the subject matter in hand.

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