

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM WITHIN THE POSTCOLONIAL AND POSTCOMMUNIST FRAMEWORK¹

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Abstract

This article presents some ideas on the future of feminism starting from the postcolonial/postcommunist framework, based on similarities in the decolonisation and respectively transition periods in what regards approaches to gender and feminist practices, with a special interest in India and Romania. Some of these refer to belonging to the neoliberal paradigm and necessity to disrupt it, by strengthening the bottom-up work of the non-governmental organisations, encouraging alternative knowledge systems and giving a voice to so-far silent members of society and non-human others, while focusing on a feminist ethic of care and using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for change.

Keywords: the postcolonial and postcommunist framework; decolonisation of knowledge; feminism; feminist ethics of care.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2023/19/1.01

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed quite a lot of challenges to supporters of feminism, mainly regarding the increased impact it has had on women, which represent the majority of essential and domestic workers worldwide, as well as of the workers in the informal industry, according to the 2022 UN and UNDP Report *Government Responses to COVID-19: Lessons on gender equality for a world in turmoil*. Concerns regarding the re-traditionalisation of gender roles were numerous, as care work responsibilities increased during the pandemic, especially for women and girls, with reports claiming that, due to school closure, health issues and economic shortages, globally, women spent an average of 30 additional hours per week on childcare alone, on top of the 76.2% of the total amount of care work

¹ This article is based on the keynote speech at the International Conference CONFLUENCES: INDIAN STUDIES AND ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVES. FROM CROSS-CULTURAL TO FEMINIST APPROACHES, organized by the 'Rabindranath Tagore' Cultural Center, in partnership with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) under the auspices of the Indian Embassy in Romania, 19 March 2022.

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they carried before the pandemic, which is 3.2 times more than men (data based on the 2021 Report by UN women entitled *Feminist Ideas for a Post-Covid World: 2*).

But also, the pandemic provided a great opportunity to depart from the neoliberal paradigm prevalent in the world today and renegotiate a future primarily on feminist terms. In a widely circulated article published in the *Financial Times* at the beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020, Arundhati Roy stated her belief that returning to the “normal” of the pre-pandemic times would be completely wrong. For her, this “normal” includes prejudice and hatred, avarice, misused information and environmental problems. That is why Roy urges us to use the opportunity offered by the pandemic, which is to sever our ties with the past and build a new future, by stepping through “a portal”, a metaphor that we can all relate to, connected as it is to the technological times we are living in (Roy, 2020).

Indeed, COVID has been a revealer to some of the worst parts of humanity and we can therefore use it as a basis for change, towards a better post-pandemic feminist world. Both India and Romania, deeply affected by the pandemic, are in great need of re-thinking their future, crossing the portal into a world based on feminist democratic values and on shared ideals of equity, diversity and inclusion of all entities involved in life on our planet, in a sustained effort to give an equal voice to all types of others and otherness.

2. “Posts” as “siblings of subalternity”. Transnational culture in “the realm of the beyond”

This is the collocation used by Bogdan Ștefănescu in his 2012 volume entitled *Postcommunism. Postcolonialism. Siblings of Subalternity*, in which he puts forward the idea that postcommunism and postcolonialism are part of the same framework, and characterized by the same elements: “Soviet and Western colonialism are both subtypes or instances of *coloniality*, which can be seen as the overarching category or *genus*” and they are “siblings of subalternity” (66). This paradigmatic commonality is based on economic, psychological, political and cultural aspects of colonization, which indicate the same commonality in their “post” periods. A similar opinion had been previously supported by David Chioni Moore (2001), who argued for a universal use of the term postcolonial as a suitable label for a critique of Western power and by extension of imperial power in general.

The parallel postcolonial/ postcommunist has since been examined by a great number of researchers and academics, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe (among others, Lefter 2001, Oțoiu 2003, Surdulescu 2006, Martin 2011, Tlostanova 2012 and 2018, Marinescu 2018 and 2020) and some from the West (Chioni Moore 2001, Chari and Verdery 2009), who noticed the similarities between the two,

starting in fact from the colonial period, with some Romanian ones proposing the term semi-colonisation (Lefter 2001; Surdulescu 2006; Martin 2011).

The two processes of colonisation and their “posts” have been discussed as part of the same paradigm, although some discrepancies are present, mostly referring to time and space (almost half a century separates postcommunist decolonisation from the postcolonial one; the “liminality” in terms of geographic position of Central and Eastern Europe and its marginality regarding the West, its in-betweenness as opposed to the great distance of the colonised territories in the case of the British Empire) and ideology (marxist in the case of postcolonialism, predominantly neo/liberal and antimarxist in the case of postcommunism). However, the decolonisation/ *transition* periods are characterised by the same elements, in the words of Cristina Şandru (2012) “a cocktail of accelerated marketization, commodification and integration in the global circuit of capital”, connected to “a large supply of cheap labor”, as well as “the very postcolonial phenomenon of economic migration to the affluent metropolis” in all its diversity, with the end result of transforming the postcommunist space into “the capitalist West’s proximate Third World” (160).

The terms in which Homi Bhabha describes culture in the postcolonial spaces as happening in the “realm of the beyond”, “neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past” (Bhabha, 1994) characterize in fact postcommunism as well. Both cultural spaces are defined by the same marginal, hybrid and fluid realities (Oţoiu 2003, Terian 2012). Adrian Oţoiu applies this model on Romanian literature of the 1980’s and concludes that the postcolonial framework, characterized by hybridity, double-codedness, liminality and ambiguity, finds an excellent space in the self-censoring literary genres of the period, more specifically the allegory and the parable, which were used to approach the straining political realities. Andrei Terian considers that the postcommunist literary space cannot be discussed under the paradigm of the postcolonial in its entirety, as only some parts of the former Tsarist and Austro-Hungarian empires are fit for this inclusion, and proposes four types of “dependent” literatures, still similar to Bhabha’s: minority, marginal, (post) colonial and mimetic.

Moreover, some notice the dialogue between postcolonial and postcommunist cultures (Şandru 2012), based on common elements and problems: “structures of exclusion/ inclusion”, “formations of nationalism, structures of othering and representations of difference”, “forms and historical realisations of anti-colonial/ anti-imperial struggle, “the experience of trauma”, and “resistance as a complex of discourses ranging from openly oppositional to carnivalesque and magical realist” (Şandru, 2012: 8). Regarding the post-soviet space, it is relevant to mention Violeta Kelertas who has done extensive research into Baltic postcolonial literature, defined in terms of mimicry and the diasporic (2006), Madina Tlostanova, who characterizes the post-soviet culture as defined by “creolization, hybridity,

bilingualism, the psychology of the returned gaze and the colonialist/ coloniser intersection, as well as a stress on transculturation instead of acculturation and assimilation, can already be found in their specific postsocialist forms” (Tlostanova, 2012: 138), or Benedikts Kalnačs (2016), who describes Baltic drama along the lines of postcolonialism/decolonization, including internal European colonialism (21).

In the current context, defined by Bill Ashcroft (2009) as *transnation* – globalisation with its international corporations, the global economic crises, to which we can add the current health crises, the postcolonial (and we could add to this the postcommunist) reading “is not simply located in its capacity to cross borders, or even to imagine a borderless future, but in its capacity to dissolve the boundary between past and future through acts of memory that paradoxically imagine a different world” (84).

Finally, it is important to note the clear advantage which the mutual acknowledgement by the two *posts* would bring (Şandru 2015, Marinescu 2020). These refer to the lessons we could learn from one another and the collaboration in creating a common, more inclusive, future. From postcolonialism we could retain “the articulation of how structures of domination work; how models of alterity are formed; and how the imbrications of power and knowledge produce ideologically interpellated subjects, as well as the emphasis on how subjects negotiate and contest these hegemonic ideological structures”, while “post-communism can offer the neo-Marxist versions of post-colonialism a necessary reality check” (Şandru, 2015: 157).

3. *Feminism and its future*

3.1 *Postcommunist feminism – subaltern position in the Western gaze*

There are numerous points of intersection between postcolonial and postcommunist feminism, especially as they are interpreted in opposition to Western feminism, and in context it is relevant to mention *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova, 1997), as a Western gaze over the Balkans (we can view the region metaphorically and extend it to the entire post-soviet space). In Said’s vein, it is similar to *Orientalism* (1978), a superiority position from which the West construes the Orient, for what is the European postcommunist space if not as the Balkans is Europe’s Orient within, an in-between, hybrid region, also called “the second world”. In terms of feminism, there is the same (absent) space that Eastern Europe holds, vis-a-vis the West, closer to subaltern feminism (to use Spivak’s term). In her Introduction of the volume *Borderlands in European Gender Studies. Beyond the East–West Frontier* (2020), to which she is one of the co-editors, Teresa Kulawik (2020) notices the mechanism which functioned in the postcommunist context – a gradual dilution of the concept of Europeaness the more Eastern one got, as “these borderlands functioned not as

Europe's Other in terms of a binary qualitative alterity, but rather as Western Europe's incomplete self, employing mechanisms of quantitative inferiorization" (11). Indeed, a scale of Europeanness around "ethnic-racializing categories of Slaviness as semideveloped, semi-civilized, semi-Oriental" has been developed and in the discussion of "multiple Europes", there is the Western-Eastern Europe binary, where the former functions as the "true Europe", and the latter is continually handed off (Boatcă 2006, 2015; Todorova, 1997 qtd. in Kulawik, 2020: 11).

Nataša Kovačević (2008) showed that the gaze of Western Europe towards its more Eastern region is viewed in terms of difference: while the former is "enlightened, developed and civilized", the latter is characterized by its "lamentable cultural, political or economic backwardness (e.g. agrarian, old-fashioned, despotic, totalitarian, obedient, abnormally violent, bloodthirsty)" or at best deserving "praiseworthy conservation of its 'noble savages' (here, pallid Western city-dwellers, enervated by industrial fumes or corporate discipline, are contrasted with big, healthy, lazy, and gregarious Eastern Europeans)" (2).

The response of postcommunist feminism in view of this gaze was to accept it tacitly, and to adopt the Western impositions in terms of both theoretical framework and activism. It is what Mihaela Miroiu (2004, 2006, 2015) called "room-service" feminism and Kristen Ghodsee (2004) "feminism by design". These correspond to the subaltern position of which Spivak described in that the models provided by the West were initially followed as such, without any (or little) consideration given to local issues and local solutions.

One of the most common critiques of both the postcolonial and postcommunist feminist activists regards the risk of co-optation³ of NGOs in the neoliberal paradigm (Roy 2004; Korolczuk 2016; Ana 2018). This refers mostly to the precarious position of the NGOs in both these spaces in-between on the one hand international donors and institutions who aim to impose their own agenda, the constraining national or supranational bureaucracies which limit their actions and can also act as demotivators, and on the other hand the need to address specific local issues and action for change. Ultimately, these lead to a dependency status of feminist activists and their organisations, which they would need to depart from.

At the same time, there is a lack of knowledge between postcolonial and postcommunist feminist scholars, with the postcommunist ones still not recognised as "legitimate representatives of transnational feminist traditions" and lacking "an established feminist agenda of their own" (Tlostanova, Hapar-Björkert and Koobak, 2019: 82). In order to turn "transnational feminist discourses into a truly alternative

³ The term co-optation was defined by Philip Selznick as "the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence" (Selznick, 1949: 13).

global theory and practice, free from the coloniality of knowledge”, the solution lies in drawing coalitions without the Western mediation, with two simultaneous actions: for the Western feminists “to stop prescribing the terms of the conversation and the categories of analysis, classifying others according to their proximity to or remoteness from the Western norm”, and the second and third world feminists refusing “to build any position or idea into the pre-existing Western feminist template” and “designing alternative canons and drawing on re-emerging genealogies” (85).

3.2 Change of paradigm – vision for the future of feminism

In present times, neoliberalism, alongside transnationalism, characterises both the postcolonial and the postcommunist spaces and that means a focus on masculine features in society, such as competition, profitmaking, individualism, entrepreneurship, self-resilience and self-sufficiency, the meritocratic ideals, which prevail over the feminine ones of cooperation and collaboration, community needs and collectivism, communal interests, understanding and support, equity and inclusion of the vulnerable in the transnational dialogue. In what regards care, we have been witnessing a “professionalization of care through services”: schools, hospitals, nursing homes, care facilities for disabled people, funeral homes, etc., as denounced by Joan Tronto in her 2013 book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. Moreover, *The Care Manifesto* (2020) emphasizes the crisis of care due to the governments accepting “neoliberal capitalism's near-ubiquitous positioning of profitmaking as the organising principle of life”, and this has systematically led to “prioritising the interests and flows of financial capital, while ruthlessly dismantling welfare states and democratic processes and institutions”, with care and care work constantly devalued as they have been associated with women and considered “unproductive” (3).

Within this neoliberal paradigm, present-day feminism focuses on Western white middle-class types of feminism, which aim “to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition” (Frazer, 2009: 106) or which view “empowerment” and “choice” incorporated into the liberal individualistic discourse and popular culture (McRobbie, 2009). We also talk about feminism in neoliberal market terms, as of “transnational business feminism” (Roberts, 2015) or “market feminism” (Kantola and Squires, 2012). The “dangerous liaison” with neoliberalism and its focus on individualism is denounced in a newspaper article by Nancy Frazer (2013) in very critical terms:

Where feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to “lean in”⁴. A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now

⁴ A reference to Facebook/ Meta Chief Operating Officer and multibillionaire Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), whose main

celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised "care" and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy. (Frazer, 2013)

Other types of criticisms have to do with the limits feminism has reached, as we are living in a post-feminist world, a forever questioning world in which we should not fight for equality, as equality is not reachable and therefore not desirable either, a world with girl power, but also with a constant critical gaze posed on them by the heteronormative, hyperfeminine society. Backlash is present, together with the idea that women themselves are unhappy with the achievements of feminism and that society in general is worse-off due to feminism. Susan Walby (2011) refutes all these, and mentions three challenges for feminism in the neoliberal and postfeminist context: mainstreaming, as feminism engages with government; the intersection with allies and competing forces and the intensification of the neoliberal context (2). To these criticisms we can add the increase of populism, nationalism and right-wing views belittling women and their role.

Evidently, the response to all these challenges in the post-pandemic world is not less feminism, but more feminism, within the postcolonial and postcommunist framework, based on more intersections between the two and creating solidarity and support between them. The model I would like to suggest in this article for the future of feminism is based on reversing the neoliberal paradigm, which the COVID 19 pandemic provided the opportunity for, by bringing feminist care in the centre of our lives.

As far back as 1990, Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto considered that caring is “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” and specified that the world includes our bodies, our selves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web” (40). *The Care Manifesto* (2020) emphasises the same type of connection between all living entities and the planet itself in the definition provided for care as “our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive - along with the planet itself” (6).

The way care is understood nowadays is based on a patriarchal neoliberal model, also adopted in the postcolonial and postcommunist countries, with women providing this service “naturally”, therefore without pay. They are willing to do it for free because it matters to them, on a free, globalized market, regulated by the

criticism was that it did not take into consideration the struggles of ordinary women in the workplace and instead focussed on privileged women’s struggle for top positions of power.

principles of supply and demand (Tronto, 2013: 7). Care is even more complex, with the so-called *second* and *third* world women providing the care services on the free market of the West, which adds to the argumentation that networking between them should constitute a must. The danger of a care-less world, as emphasized in *The Care Manifesto* (2020) lies in the growth and spread of uncaring communities, marked by incel groups, white supremacists, nationalists, misogynists, populists, which “base their shared identity on exclusion and hatred”, rather than inclusion and support, and who invest in policing and surveillance rather than social welfare for the needy (16).

The model proposed here is originated in Fisher’s and Tronto’s (1990) feminist democratic ethic of care, completed by Tronto (2013), with the following types of care and ethical qualities: attentiveness - caring about; responsibility – caring for; competence – care giving, responsiveness – care-receiving, and plurality, communication, trust and respect; solidarity – caring with. From Tronto’s point of view, as individuals are in relationships, at different points in their lives either providing or necessitating care, they are not only creatures of the market, but mainly creatures of care. The feminist democratic ethic of care should explain how they can move between these two points: autonomy and dependency (as opposed to neoliberalism which focuses on choice and providing free access to it). The same idea exists in *The Care Manifesto* (2020), which claims that recognizing our need to give and receive care “not only provides us with a sense of our common humanity, but enables us to confront our shared fears of human frailty, rather than project them onto those we label as ‘dependent’” (30).

This appeal to changing the current paradigm by placing care in the centre of our lives cannot be happening without – in Rosi Braidotti’s formulation – de-territorialising knowledge (Braidotti, 2018: xx) – that is, including the entities so far voiceless: not only the ones who have not yet made it to the “official cartographies”, meaning “indigenous knowledge systems, feminists, queers, otherwise enabled, non-humans or technologically mediated existences, etc.”, but also “non-human agents, technologically mediated elements, Earth-others (land, water, plants, animals) and non-human inorganic agents (plastic, wires, information highways, algorithms, etc.)” (xx).

The reason, of course, is increasing diversity of knowledge and creating enhanced alliances to strengthen the positive connection between all others on a global scale, a model which we can only benefit from. The list of minority subjects Braidotti provides does not specify the category “postcommunist”, but, viewing the demonstration above, we could include it:

The strength of these minoritarian subjects (Feminist/ Queer/ Migrant/ Poor/ Decolonial/ Diasporic/ Diseased/ etc.) consists in their capacity to carry out alternative modes of knowing and becoming. Their ability to set up transversal

relations breaks up segregational patterns and establishes border crossings that aim to actualise their knowledge and visions. (Braidotti, 2018: xx-xxi)

The auspices for such a post-pandemic feminist model are promising, as the same ideas are supported by many others, among whom Liberian peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (2011) Leymah Gbowee, who stresses the need for a change in the world leadership, as well, as she underlines the interconnectedness between countries and individuals and solidarity (also a feminist feature), which should be the basis of a common post-pandemic future (Gbowee, 2020). Also, the UN Women's *Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice* (2021) proposes a new feminist, just, global eco-social contract, which should be based on solidarity and the common good and aim at shifting gender power relations and deal with discrimination (80). Similarly, the Generation Equality Forum (Mexico City and Paris, 2021) looks into accelerating gender equality by 2026 through government, philanthropy, civil society, and private organisations' commitments to redress some centuries-old gender discriminatory practices in their *Global Acceleration Plan*. Finally, in the US, the post-pandemic recovery plan of the State of Hawaii, to give just an example, suggestively entitled *Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs. A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19* (2020), mentions the necessity to value essential work, address the crises in healthcare, social, ecological and economic policies, by integrating "the knowledge developed by marginalized communities that will help us to prioritize greater social well-being as key to the economy" and promoting the ones who at the moment are missing, i.e. "the voices of those most impacted by COVID-19, including women, girls, femme-identified and nonbinary people, racialized women/women of color and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander and immigrant women in Hawai'i" (1-2).

4. Conclusions. Change of paradigm as vision of a feminist future

This article revised an extensive contemporary literature to position postcolonialism and postcommunism within the same framework and embrace a vision for a transnational feminist future around the idea of care. The social, economic, but especially the cultural dimensions of the decolonization and respectively transition periods of the two *posts* prove to be congruent (in spite of some clear differences), which encourages a discussion in which they can be placed together. The feminist lens, moreover an inclusive type of feminism, which takes into consideration alternative voices so far silenced, offers a proper clarifying view of the future. This involves a change of paradigm: from the one in which we are now, based on neoliberal ideas of free flows of capital and focus on the individual, to an inclusive feminist paradigm of care for the communities and transnational support, starting from the postcolonial and postcommunist framework and prompted by new understandings of the role of feminism triggered by dire circumstances such as the COVID pandemic, wars, etc. The world of the future

should be one characterized by feelings of sorority, empathy and compassion towards the vulnerable and needy ones, a world in which we should be able to celebrate diversity rather than be engaged in actions which erase it, in which we can express our solidarity and respect for otherness, a world in which we can seek and offer mutual support. Also, a world in which the postcolonial and the postcommunist experiences come to the forefront, on a par with the Western mainstream one.

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