A critical introduction to Western Feminism –

Liberation or Domination?

Anna-Sophia ten Brink

Matrikel-Nr.: 3189599

E-Mail: anna.tenbrink@stud.ph-karlsruhe.de

Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe

Dozentin: Prof. Dr. Martin

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1. Introduction

The topic of feminism has been widespread and discussed in politics and people's everyday life with varying intensity for many years. There have been different waves of feminism and debates all around the world. Current discussions of gendered language are just one example of ongoing fights for equality.

This paper introduces the topic of Western feminism. It takes a closer look at the feminism which evolved in the Western world, precisely in Europe and the United States. However, this will be a critical introduction - for several reasons explained - as the paper progresses. The paper examines the question if the movement of Western feminism succeeded in liberation for women regarding equal rights between men and women, more freedom, and self-determination. Moreover, it will investigate if said liberation was limited to a certain type of women or if it was achieved and gained for all women. Further, it will explore if and how liberation was reached within the Western feminist movement and if it was attained by dominating and using others, in this regard other women, or if goals were obtained by a change within society.

The paper is spilt in three main parts. After introducing and differentiating the terms sex and gender, the paper moves on to introduce the topic of feminism in general. It will then focus on Western feminism and the globalisation of feminism and will explore the impact of Western feminism in a global context. The third part presents the areas of criticism towards Western feminism. Western feminism will first be taken into a critical account by postcolonial feminists with a closer look at postcolonial feminist Chanda Mohanty and her paper *Under Western Eyes*. Secondly, the Western concept of feminism will be criticised by African American feminists within the Black feminist movement in the United States. This chapter will also make the complexity of Black women's suffrage visible within the topic of feminism. At the end, there will be a conclusion.

2. Sex and gender

This chapter shortly introduces the terms sex and gender as a means of scaffolding for the following topics. The two terms are not synonyms and help to understand the foundational idea behind feminism. This knowledge will also be helpful because the terms go back historically and effected the difference between men and women in many ways with the establishment of the patriarchy, which will also be addressed in this chapter.

Coming to the two terms: Gender is more complex than sex, as it is a social category, describing cultural norms and acts. Gender is about how to behave and act as a girl or a boy and it effects many areas of life: what to wear, how to speak, what to study. All these aspects are part of gender and therefore part of a gender role. Sex on the other hand is biologically defined by anatomy. Nowadays, one's anatomy is no longer one's destiny, meaning that there are ways to either change one's sex by surgery or to take on a different gender, because sex and gender are no longer fixed singular positions. Today there are various gender identities such as female, male, and transgender (cf. Dixon 2011, 2). Just because you are born with a certain sex does not mean you need to take on a specific gender role for the rest of your life. Since gender is something learned and constructed around people's physical sex, it therefore can and should be deconstructed to find a way out of the singularity of gender roles (cf. Döring 2011, 172f).

Furthermore, the problem that occurs with these fixed gender roles is that power dynamics were often explained and justified through gender and especially gender difference served and still serves as a means of legitimising patriarchal power. Patriarchy in this sense refers to a "[…] hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more men (as in a council) exert absolute authority over the community as a whole" (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021).

In a patriarchally dominated society, gender positions construct the female role as weak, dark, emotional, domestic, inferior, and passive while the male role is depicted as strong, en-lightened, rational, superior, and active. However, this construction is neither natural nor veri-table. Any apparent deficient differences can only be a foundational product of the patriarchal power system, produced to justify male dominated acting (cf. Döring 2011, 173f).

Since the 1980's those fixed oppositional constructions between sex and gender by a pa-triarchal society have been critically questioned by feminist theorists as these attributes reveal more about the speaking subject who invented them than about the object for which they are made (cf. Döring 2011, 172). This leads over to the next chapter about feminism.

3. Feminism

This chapter will focus on feminism, with a special look on Western feminism and the globalisation of feminism. Feminism is *"[t]he belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state"* (Cambridge Dictionary). A feminist therefore is "[a] person who supports the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men" (Oxford Dictionary). The authors Brunell and Burkett go further, in saying that feminism is "[…] the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes" (Brunell & Burkett) and not just between men and women, but between everyone.

Feminism aims to overcome traditional, single roles within the construction of gender and is thus not limited to women alone. It is also not about a female-dominated society, because domination is nothing wanted, but about equality and self-determination. All humans, independently of their gender, sex and body should have the same rights and freedoms (cf. Stokowski 2016, 160f). So far, feminism has affected many areas of life of women in a positive way, regarding divorce laws, sexual freedoms, the right to vote, education, contraception and more (cf. Dixon 2011, 1).

3.1 Western feminism

Western feminism evolved in America and Europe in the 1960's. The concept of feminism was mostly defined by women in the United States. This wave of feminism was a response to the restrictions Western women had to endure in their daily lives. Throughout Western history, women were limited to the domestic sphere and men to public life. Those fixed positions within a patriarchal society were explained through single gender roles, which Western feminists were starting to challenge (cf. Brunell & Burkett).

There were three different waves of feminism in the past. However, it is important to be aware that "waves" in this context do not describe a smooth movement which evolves like a wave, but a movement which starts with fights and protests which serve as key moments marking the beginning of a new feminist wave (cf. Stokowski 2016, 134).

The first Western wave of feminism was at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. This movement involved property rights and the central issue of the women's right to vote. The first American feminism wave ended with the 19th amendment in the US constitution in 1919, which gave women the right to vote (cf. Drucker 2018).

The second wave began in the 1940's and had its peak in the 1960's and 1970's. In this period, women were fighting for equal social rights. The slogan of that movement was *the Personal is political*, challenging the general belief that women can only have an identity though

a man and children as a wife and mother. Here again, single gender roles become visible. The American feminist and activist Betty Friedan with her book *The Feminine Mystique*, played a key role in the movement for the fight of equality in 1963 (cf. Drucker 2018).

The third wave of feminism started in the early 1990's. The third movement includes a continuation and a reaction towards the second wave. The reaction was driven by African Americans and women from the global South who criticised Western feminism for emphasising and focusing predominantly on the experiences made by white middle-class women, leaving the rest behind (cf. Drucker 2018).

Third wave feminists stress the importance of diversity in women's experiences and refuse the concept of a universal women's experience because of diverse cultural beliefs and customs (cf. Dixon 2011, 4f). In addition to that, African American women rose awareness of "[…] how race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, and nationality are all significant factors when discussing feminism" (Drucker 2018).

3.2 Globalisation of feminism

With the advance of globalisation in the 1990's, Western feminists in America and Europe began to interact with the Asian, African and Latin-American feminist movement, which have started to rise with the third wave of feminism. Intellectual women from "developed" western countries were shocked by the requirements and the way women were treated in the global South, like wearing a veil in public, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and more (cf. Brunell & Burkett). Western feminists then started to perceive themselves as saviours of those women in the global South (cf. Brunell & Burkett). The problem however was that their perception and solution for these women in the global South were at odds with the real live concerns women had to face and endure in those countries. Western feminists overlooked the aspect of culture and cultural differences in other countries (cf. Hawkesworth 2012, 211).

In numerous African countries, the status of women began to diminish with the arrival of European colonisers. However, with the arrival of Western feminism, the assumption was made that patriarchy was the core problem instead of European imperialism. As European colonisers brought the patriarchal system to these African countries in the first place, it becomes apparent that this is a delusion (cf. Brunell & Burkett).

This conflict between women from "developed" and developing countries becomes very evident at international conferences, for example during the *International Conference on Population and Development* in Cairo in 1994: Native women protested outside, because the Agenda was made my Western people, without consulting the concerned women (cf. Brunell & Burkett). Native women criticised the agenda, because the conference was focusing on

contraception and abortion and not on how underdevelopment and poverty was holding women back. Professor of Law Azizah al-Hibri wrote: "[Third World women] noted that they could not very well worry about other matters when their children were dying from thirst, hunger, or war, [the] conference instead centred around reducing the number of Third World babies in order to preserve the earth's resources, despite (or is it 'because of') the fact that the First World consumes much of these resources" (Brunell & Burkett). These statements and assumptions are highly evocative and portray a very biased perception of women in the global South, who were spoken for and not spoken with and perceived as immature, unknowing and uncapable of taking care of their life not because they did not want to, but because they had to face poverty and satisfy basic needs of life first - like food and water - before being able to tackle problems of equality between sexes (cf. Riyal 2019, 83f).

Just because Western feminists have the privilege of not dealing with the issues of poverty, does not give them the right to prepare "[…] the path to liberate their 'unfortunate sisters' [without asking and integrating them into the movement]" (Riyal, 2019, 83). This issue is directly linked to the next chapter.

4. Areas of criticism

This chapter deals with areas of criticism towards Western feminism. The concept has been criticised by various authors from different domains. This paper focuses on two of them: it describes criticism towards the concept of Western feminism from a postcolonial feminist point of view, with a special look at postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty and her deconstruction of the so-called term "third-world" women (cf. Mohanty 1984, 333). Following this, it takes a closer look at the experience and criticism of African American women and women of colour in the United States within the Black feminist movement.

4.1 Postcolonial critique of Western feminism

In the 1980's a dialogue between postcolonialism and feminism blossomed, which developed into postcolonial feminism, producing the writing of postcolonial feminist theories. Postcolonial feminism is part of the third wave of feminism, among generational / youth feminism and eco feminism (cf. Mack-Canty 2004, 168). All three domains aim and work on diverse perspectives and inclusivity of feminism (cf. Riyal 2019, 83).

Postcolonial feminism aims to discover and analyse the continuing negative effects of colonialism in the feminist movement, especially in the Western feminist movement. Postcolonial feminism tries to dismantle imperialism in feminism, particularly in Western feminism,

regarding its perception towards women in the global South. It states that feminism is not something for Western women only but for everybody and therefore also for women in the global South who have so far only been spoken for (cf. Mack-Canty 2004, 164f).

4.2 Deconstructing the concept of "third-world" women

Chandra Mohanty is a postcolonial feminist, born in India in 1955. One of Mohanty's most famous works is *Under Western Eyes* which she wrote in 1984, deeply influencing the thinking of many feminists. *Under Western Eyes* challenges mainstream Western feminism, and the view Western feminists have on the so-called developing world (cf. Goisauf 2019). Mohanty's work is influenced by addressing three major core themes: to decolonise feminism, to demystify capitalism and to finally replace Western feminism and reorient feminism (cf. Thobani 2005, 221).

Along with postcolonial critique of Western feminism, Mohanty argues that Western feminism is narrow and exclusive, for several reasons. First, it is designed for white women in "developed" industrialised countries only, hence the model cannot be applied globally (cf. Dixon 2011, 5). Because "[w]hat is known as the *Phallic principle* in one part of the world, doesn't necessarily apply to the other parts" (Döring 2011,176).

Postcolonial feminism also criticises Western feminism for being based on values of Western standards and liberations, which are then transferred to women in the global South, disregarding cultural differences and worries women in the global South are concerned with. This issue becomes evident in the following quote by Amos and Parmar.

> [W]hile Black and Third World women are fighting daily battles for survival, for food, land and water, Western white women's cries of anguish for concern about preserving the standards of life for their children and preserving the planet for future generations sound hollow. Whose standards of life are they fighting to preserve? – white, middle-class standards undoubtedly (Amos & Parmar 2005, 60).

This quote shows the blindness of white women for the needs and struggles of women in the global South. In addition to that, Mohanty criticises the Western principle of the assumption of all women as an already established, coherent group with equal interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnicity, or race (cf. Mohanty 1984, 336f). This emphasises the importance of diversity in women's experiences and therefore rejecting the concept of a universal women's experience as was also visible in the prior passage, because of different cultural beliefs and customs (cf. Dixon 2011, 2).

Mohanty disapproves Western feminist discourse on women in developing countries, who depict women in the global South as so called "third-world" women. This perception of women in the global South portrays them as victims in a singular, monolithic subject. Following this is the creation of a stereotype of the average "third-world" woman being uneducated, poor, traditionbound, domestic, and family-oriented (cf. Mohanty 1984, 337). Mohanty strongly commends to unveil the one-way construction of "third-world" women of being an object to Western feminism (cf. Ghandi 1998, 85).

The category "third-world" woman is also strongly colonialist, because of

> [...] its ethnocentric myopia disregard[…][ing] the enormous material and historical differences between 'real' "third-world" women; and second, because the composite 'Othering' of the "third-world" woman becomes a self-consolidating project for Western feminism (Ghandi 1998, 84).

Mohanty claims that „[w]ithout the overdetermined discourse that creates the third world, there would be no […] first world" (Mohanty 1984, 353). The definition of the "third-world" enables and sustains the definition of the "first-world" and Western feminists need women from developing countries to define their own Western standard of being educated, liberated and in charge of their lives. Therefore "third-world" women are serving as a contrast to the progressive, mediating and saving "first-world" women (cf. Thobani 2005, 222). The construction of this determination is used to justify Western feminists' self-definition by domination and devaluating other women which deviate from their Western standard of liberation (cf. Riyal 2019, 84). There is a clear division between "[i] who have made it and You who cannot make it [without my help]" (Trinh 1989, 86).

This concept of domination leads to the exclusion, victimising and homogenising of women in the global South. Mohanty asserts that all women are sisters in struggle and up until today, Western women have struggles in the Western world concerning equality: there is still the gender pay gap, beauty as a central feature of constructed female identity, the lock out of high-level professions (CEO's) and more (cf. Mohanty 1984, 337f). Mohanty, along with other postcolonial feminists, is calling for a commitment of all feminists for united politics of liberation and equality, apart from images of "third-world" women (cf. Mohanty 1984, 352). "It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Mohanty, 1984, 354).

This goes hand in hand with a quote from the author Langdon, referring to the white Western feminist urge to help their sister in "need": "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But, if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, let us work together" (Langdon 2012, 386). This shows how the issue with liberation is not done by only liberating one group of women and trying to liberate another one with the same model

and methods, but instead by working together. Liberation of one group of women is linked to the liberation of all women, and it can only be achieved if women are aware of this connection. In addition, the quote also offers a different approach and level of communication towards liberation and self-determination of others.

> [Because] [m]any white feminists have argued that as feminists they find it very difficult to accept arranged marriages which they see as reactionary. Our argument is that it is not up to them to accept or reject arranged marriages but up to us to challenge, accept, or reform, depending on our various perspectives, on our own terms and in our own culturally specific ways (Amos & Parmar 2005, 58).

It becomes clear that it is an important and necessary challenge for Western feminists to not judge those women from a Western perspective.

Another related problem linked to that issue is that research methods and standards used in Western feminism were developed and established by academic imperialist white men, which led to the problem that those methods were not questioned but continued in an imperialist way within Western feminist research, "[…] reproducing the 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy'" (Chis 2015). This clearly demonstrates how deeply rooted these colonial structures are and how important it is to deconstruct them. Thus, the uncritical use of methodologies in Western feminism will fail to see that these research methods are limited concerning the struggles of women of colour (cf. Mohanty 1984, 337).

This chapter has looked at some core problems of Western feminism and highlighted the most important issues, like the construction and abuse of the Western invention of the "third-world" women and the justifications and singular perspectives towards women in the global South which were based on that concept.

4.3 Black feminist critique of Western feminism

Another point of criticism towards Western feminism was perpetrated by women within the Black feminist movement in the United States. They experienced Western feminism as exclusive and racist. The Black feminist movement started in the 1960's as a reply to Western white feminism in the 1960's.

The first important organisation in the Black feminist movement was the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) which was founded in 1973 and lasted for about two years until 1975. The organisation aimed to liberate black women from racism and sexism (cf. Breines, 2002, p. 1116).

The following quote by Sojourner Truth brings this dual oppression of racism and sexism experienced by women of colour, to the point.

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? (Harris 2019, 8).

The author Truth wants to raise awareness of how white women and black women are treated differently although they are both women but with a different skin colour. This is just one example of multiple fields of discrimination the National Black Feminist Organization wanted to reveal and make aware of.

Black feminism does not only address black African American women, but all women of colour relocated to the United States by colonialism, because they all experienced the negative impact of race, class, and gender discrimination. Black feminism and resistance in the United States existed since the times of slavery but started to be a political and social position within society with the rise of Western feminism and the civil rights movement in the 1960's and 1970's. The civil rights movement left out black women, as the focus was on reducing racial discrimination of primarily black men and not the sexism and gender discrimination black women had to face. This emphasises the need of Black feminism (cf. Harris 2019, 18f).

Black feminists raised issue for the singularity of Western feminism in the United States. They claimed that the typical Western feminist was a white middle-class woman (cf. Breines 2002, 1124). African American women were not part of the Western feminist movement and felt discriminated, even though Western women did not consider themselves racist, because they were not actively acting racist. But by not including women of colour, unconscious racism originated. It is important to address the concerns of all women of colour within this topic, because the aim of Black feminism is to show the lack of the Western feminist movement which ignored the need of women of colour (cf. Breines 2002, 1118f).

> Black feminist theorists have pointed out that many of the gender-based generalizations advanced by white feminist theorists, whether as part of the critique of the philosophical canon or as part of a critique of contemporary practices, are "racist, ethnocentric, and insensitive to the concerns of women of color (Hawkesworth 2012, 13).

It becomes apparent that Western feminist theory does not include the experiences of women of colour because they only focus on gender and not also on race and other dimensions which bring difficulties for women of colour (cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1249). Western feminism established the experiences by white middle-class women as the norm and what white feminists needed

liberation from had little relevance to what women of colour needed. This is also referring to the fact that African American women are also American women, who should have the same rights and equalities as white American women (cf. Amos & Parmar 2005, 47).

However, the overall situation is difficult considering cultural differences of women of colour living in the United States. One example is the right and ability to report sexual abuse experienced at home. This is less uncomplicated for white women, but difficult to transfer to other women living in the United States with different cultural backgrounds, because one needs to consider cultural complications which can bring difficulties: Asian immigrant women often live together with several generations, where they have little privacy to make such a call and depend on their husbands as the only key to the outside world (cf. Crenshaw 1991, 1248). With this example, Black feminists try to display the problems non-white women are facing on top of gender discrimination.

On the other hand, many immigrant women, like African American, Latin, or Asian-American, where working in domestic service for white women. Western women were gaining more equality, while or because immigrant women performed the domestic labour instead. It becomes clear that short-term gains for white middle-class women, like the relief of domestic housework, was received at the expense of coloured and working-class women in the United States, neglecting the fact that they themselves did not gain equal rights for every woman (cf. Mack-Canty 2004, 166). This illustrates the clear lack of understanding the overall goal of feminism and shows the complexity of the many layers of exclusion for black women and the blindness of Western feminism towards this issue (cf. Amos & Parmar 2005, 45).

5. Conclusion

Throughout my research for the topic of Western feminism, it became evident how complex the matter is. Western feminism paved a way for liberating white women in the West by using and excluding black women, women of colour and women from the global South. Western feminists were concerned with the marginalised "other" by using a repressive concept of domination of "third-world" versus "first-world" women to measure their own achievements (cf. Riyal 2019, 83). It is to say, that Western feminism led to liberation of Western white middle-class women at the expense of dominating and exploiting immigrant women in their daily life as domestic servants and women in the global South for their ideological, theoretical concept of differentiating themselves from other women by stressing the difference between "us versus them". It becomes obvious, that liberation for women in the United States was limited to Western white women only and did not include all women.

The singularity of the concept of Western feminism on the one hand and the wrong aim to help women in other countries with a singular Western concept on the other - disregarding any cultural differences - makes the Western concept of feminism outdated. Especially in times of globalisation, multiculturality and ethnicity, were there are diverse people and multiple cultures within one country, Western feminism neither works within the Western world, nor for the rest of the world.

It becomes apparent, that the topic of feminism is a complex one and not a singular straight-forward matter. There are different layers of oppression for women, not just gender alone. This is also where the term intersectionality comes in because it highlights the different simultane-ous layers of oppression and discrimination. Intersectionality makes those visible who face multiple forms of oppression such as gender, class, and race discrimination, like women of colour, particularly immigrant women and African American women (cf. Crenshaw, 1991, 1299).

It is essential to keep up a constant questioning of ideologies and exchange of ideas with women all over the world, to meet the demands of women's concerns in the mountains of Pakistan, in the middle East, in the South or in Europe and to assess issues related to women's lives on an international basis. Moreover, it is vital to take on a miscellaneous perspective of feminism, because true feminist theory does not only include gender, but also an understand-ing of imperialism, class discrimination and racism to meet the interests of all women (cf. Amos & Parmar 2005, 61).

Finally, it is to say that today "[t]he internet is a driving force behind globalisation, drawing […] [women] from all corners of the world together into a mutual, virtual space. This can be positive for global feminism because it allows women to speak for themselves to the issues, they are most concerned by" (Dixon 2011, 5). This at the end could result in a global discourse on feminism.

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