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'Third World' perspectives on cyberfeminism

Radhika Gajjala

We have telephones, and computers and people carry cellphones and get into fancy cars ... we have Santa Barbara on TV and kitkats in our fridges ... we even drink pepsi and coke and speak and write English ... but ... do you know what saying to-mah-to juice instead of to-meh-do juice in an American airline can do to your self esteem ... if the person on the other side doesn't figure out you're speaking English?

Ask anyone who is standing in the 3-tier compartment of an Indian train for the first time and trying to get onto an upper berth ... but on the internet ... we constantly seem to think that we are communicating when there is a real danger that we don't even know we are not ...

I sometimes wonder how we take on discussions on issues of humankind when the level of communication is so suspect. ...
(From an e-mail message from the

'Third World' to someone in the 'First World'.)

In the presence of Western technology, how and when are we constructed as ignorant? What is the relevance of a Western(ised) cyberfeminism to women in the South? How do we use the contradictions of our lived existence to regain our faith in our Other-ed socio-cultural identities, while also finding ways to use Western technologies in creating and revitalising economic structures that are more relevant and user-friendly to people in 'Third World' contexts whether in the North or the South? This Viewpoint will critique the notion of 'technology as the great equaliser'.[1]

Scholars like Edward Said (1978) have shown how the production of knowledges about the colonised nations served to justify the colonialists' project. 'Orientalist' descriptions of the cultures, religions, and societies of the Middle East, Africa, and most of Asia helped to create a colonial discourse that presented these 'dark' and 'exotic' areas of the world as needing to be 'civilised' by the White Man. These descriptions are apparent in the rhetoric of development versus underdevelopment which constructs Southern populations as ignorant, just as narratives of Western technological progress also construct people from the South as ignorant.

This Viewpoint draws on scholarship relating to feminism and the production of knowledge, and the tensions between Western(ised) and non-Western (Black, Third World, etc.) feminisms, as well as by discussions about development. It is a discussion of the possibilities and impossibilities of cyberfeminism within 'Third World' contexts. Acknowledging that cyberfeminisms have opened up spaces for a dialogue that accommodates the use of Western technologies in ways that are sometimes counter to mainstream visions of technology, I suggest that the construction of the Other as ignorant is nevertheless implicit in some cyberfeminist narratives. It is beyond

the scope of this paper to resolve the conflicts or suggest definite alternatives. However, I do hope to provoke a critique that may lead to further dialogue and a search for contextual solutions.

Rhetoric of development/under-development

During the post-World War II period, most of the nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which were either former or current European colonies, were labelled as 'the underdeveloped' world. A rhetoric of underdevelopment was articulated, which instilled the universal need to pursue the goal of gaining rapid access to the lifestyles and cultures created within the context of industrialisation, and provided the necessary categories and techniques to do so. 'Development' was supposedly the over-arching solution to poverty and inequality world-wide.

Professionalisation and institutionalisation were instrumental in the notion of Development. The establishment and authorisation—by the hegemonic Western world—of certain modes of production (which in turn were supposed to lead to 'better' consumption patterns) led to the growing importance of development economists. There is implicit within this discourse the notion that Western forms of industrialisation, technological 'progress', and modes of production/consumption will lead inevitably to the democratisation of the so-called underdeveloped areas of the world.

Embedded within the concept of development is the Enlightenment narrative of a linear, progressive history. The consumer culture is touted as being a part of this progressive 'enlightened' move towards development. For instance, articles in magazines like *Time* continually portray protests against multinational corporations like Pepsi in nations such as India as a form of regression, suggesting that rejecting the 'free market' economic system and the

brand name choices offered by the consumer culture would obstruct democracy and freedom. The very arrival of Ted Turner's cable in the South is said to benefit and somehow revolutionise everyday life for the average citizen.

Cyberfeminisms

There are several approaches to cyberfeminism. What all cyberfeminists share is the belief that women should take control of and appropriate the use of cybertechnologies in an attempt to empower ourselves. Cyberfeminists seek to use internet technologies and to create spaces on-line that are empowering to women. We believe that the Internet is a feminist issue and are interested in possibilities for activism and research on it. Cyberfeminists are multimedia producers, e-mail list-administrators or moderators, programmers, web-page designers, and women who actively engage in all kinds of on-line synchronous and asynchronous spaces. We are also concerned with issues related to the designing of software and hardware. The works of scholars such as Donna Haraway (1990; 1992) and Sandra Harding inform several cyberfeminist theories and practices.

According to Nancy Paterson:[2]

> Cyberfeminism as a philosophy has the potential to create a poetic, passionate, political identity and unity without relying on a logic and language of exclusion or appropriation. It offers a route for reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology rather than on factors which are divisive. ... New electronic technologies are currently utilised to manipulate and define our experiences. Cyberfeminism does not accept as inevitable current applications of new technologies which impose and maintain specific cultural, political and sexual stereotypes. Empowerment of women in the field of new electronic

media can only result from the de-mystification of technology, and the appropriation of access to these tools.

Empowerment and re-empowerment

The term 'empowerment' is repeatedly used in the discussion and definition of cyberfeminism and implies the absolute powerlessness of the individual or community being 'empowered'. A top-down, if benevolent, patronising is implicit in the term.

Contrary to what early modernists and colonialists believed, it is not the innate cultural, economic and social structures or belief systems of the South that are to blame for their present economic crisis and almost parasitical dependence on Western aid and patronage. The Southern regions are in the state they are because, historically, their cultural identities, belief systems, as well as their social and economic structures, were eroded and stripped away. For example, during British rule, traditional modes of production in India were forcibly replaced by industrial mass production which was more beneficial to the British economy than to the people in the sub-continent. In this era, traditional products lost markets and traditional producers their confidence. The resulting outmoding of traditional forms of community and production under the ideological cover of Western enlightenment, led to a loss of self among local producers. People with expert knowledge of local forms of production were declared 'ignorant', and Southern modes of thought and life were implicitly and explicitly constructed as 'backward' and 'traditional'. The peoples of the South were thus de-empowered. Verhelst (1990) suggests that the nature of underdevelopment in this context is a stripping away of identity which leaves people without the capability of self-determination. Therefore, as Mavrocordatos (1998) suggests, in 'the context of the sometimes systematic disenfranchisement of communities by government or colonising

powers, it may be preferable to address the notion of 're-empowerment'.

Cyberfeminism and the 'Third World'

Whatever the reasons, whether they seem just or unjust, it is undeniable that, within today's global context, people of the South need to remain connected with the North if they are to gain access to various power structures. Women who wish to re-empower themselves and have access to such structures do need to learn to use and access different kinds of technologies. But is it true that technology or Internet access and use in and of itself will perform the great task of 'equalising' power structures? Do they guarantee a reduction in the social, political, and economic injustices faced by the de-empowered within the world's hierarchies? In this context, merely describing material and cultural access as well as listing obstacles to Internet access is not an indicator of 'progress' or re-empowerment. Such cyberfeminist prescriptions for the 'empowerment' of women from the South offer 'technological and managerial fixes ... rather than addressing or solving basic ... problems' (Shiva 1994). They create new problems by 'destabilising livelihoods in the Third World'.

Their analysis of the situation, as I read it, is still within a certain paradigm or framework of thought that implicitly assumes that ('Western') technology and notions of progress linked to mainstream perspectives on technology and communication using these technologies, empower women all over the world. While it does not totally ignore the fact that women *do* exploit and dominate other women, there appears to be an assumption that more women on the Internet or more women participating in certain power-fields automatically assures a more egalitarian world.[3]

Do not misunderstand me. I do believe that communication is power. I also believe that the power structures established in the North define much of our everyday lives,

whether we are geographically located in the North or the South. Thus women in the South need to have access to and be able to use Internet technologies. I myself (as an individual) enjoy the benefits of e-mail, 'listing', web-publishing, etc. and think that the potential for women the world over to network via the Internet, as well as to create 'public spaces', exists. I also know that cyberfeminism has different strains and that not all cyberfeminists would deny the complexities of lived contexts. What I am arguing is that the mainstream cyberfeminist prescriptions to resolve what they see as 'Third World' women's oppression does not address the complexities of the lived contexts of women in the South.

Notes

1 'Third World' is used to signify the Other of 'First World' regions.
2 See http://echonyc.com:70/0/Cul/Cyber/paterson
3 See discussion archives at http://comm-posite.uqam.ca/videaz/wg3/, the Gender Perspectives section of 'The Virtual Conference: The Right to Communicate and the Communication of Rights', 11 May–26 June 1998.

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NGOs: ladles in the global soup kitchen?

Stephen Commins

This paper is a reflection on four questions as they relate to Northern or international NGOs (in this paper, NGOs refers to Northern NGOs unless otherwise indicated):

1 If NGOs are to have a role in a globalised world, will it be primarily as the delivery service for global welfare—ladles in the soup kitchen—or will they find alternative identities?
2 Are NGOs equipped to represent or deliver alternative development models?
3 If funding 'success' often covers weaknesses in NGOs, what are the changes that need to be made in order to deepen and broaden impact?
4 How can NGOs establish their independence and autonomy from governments? Are there ways for them to be both representative (or locally rooted) and global?