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Feminism and Feminist Scholarship Today

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The question of feminist studies today inevitably takes us through a series of intellectual positions that tend to derive from a presumed universalism in our analytic work—the more familiar formalisms of mid to late twentieth-century feminism, postfeminism, gender studies, masculinity studies, queer theory, transgender theory. Terms like these remain controversial in the West and, as such, the subject of bitter battles or, worse, official indifference and accusations of irrelevance. This is a matter of deep concern. Nevertheless, even more worrisome to my mind is the fact that our understandable immersion in local polemics means we often tend to neglect unrecognized culturally grounded differences outside the narrow confines of the Western academy, or limit our pedagogical practice to what Chandra Mohanty calls “carefully placed and domesticated” token voices (212). Ofelia Schutte would agree. She writes, “the speaker from the dominant culture is basically saying: communicate with me entirely on the terms I expect; beyond this I am not interested” (56).

So, here’s my essay test question for the day: “What do Rigoberta Menchú, Malalai Joya, Ayaan Hirsi Ali have in common? Contrast with Virginia Woolf, Leslie Marmon Silko, Anna Akhmatova.” Answer: The first three are activists, from Guatemala, Afghanistan, and Somalia respectively, whose works (none of them fiction, sometimes co-authored) have become staples of gender-studies modules in world literature and culture courses in the United States in the last decades. They tend to be read, thus, as sociological case studies rather than prose stylists. The second three, all associated with high art, come from Great Britain, the United States, and Russia; they represent the complete list of the overlap of modern women writers from three standard US anthologies of world literature (Norton, Bedford, and Longman), the token women admitted to the very select men’s club of the very best ever thought and written. These two lists thus in some ways complement each other and frequently share space in our pedagogical practice in the “gender” module of literature courses. Yet the obvious tokenism, and the breakdown between the West (where thought and art happen) and the rest (the lands of precarious forms of political practice), continue unexamined. In brief: despite the now-canonical status of works by women and people of diverse ethnicity and sexuality in many of our courses, our challenge is to get beyond the familiar token voice, to reach outside the expected terms of discussion, and to imagine rethinking feminist scholarship today as a vast compendium of many voices and many legitimate forms of thinking, where English and the West is but one thread.

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