

The Ground Beneath Her Feet: 'Third World' Feminisms

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Abstract

This paper advances the argument that third world feminism calls for a re-orienting of our critical energies from merely taking sides in a debate, to questioning the material and ideological lens that interpolates the debate, i.e., the habitus from which we make our stand. Constituted by the tension between “finding the ground on which we make our stand” and the struggle with whether “we are mostly given that territory”, third world feminisms pursue political agendas interpolated by the cracks and fissures of post-colonial nationhood and internationalized feminisms. The ground of struggle is varied – working conditions and economic self-determination, family and ideology, ethnic conflict and pluralism, sexuality and subversion, disciplinarity and the production of academic knowledge, religion and secularism, human rights and supra-liberalism. This paper pursues a somewhat non-systematic encounter with these different yet intersecting thematics in relation to discrepant third world feminist debates on the plurality of discourses and practices regarding veiling and unveiling.

Key Words: *Post-colonial, third world, veil*

* Vasuki Nesiah is a Senior Associate with the International Center for Transitional Justice. Thanks to Tony Anghie and Obiora Okafor for the initial suggestion that I write a piece mapping and analyzing contemporary third world feminist approaches; this turned out to be a different kind of intervention - in effect, the articulation of one particular third world feminist vision that was not a review of the field of third world feminist debates, but itself an engagement both, from, and with, the ground of third world feminist debates. Acknowledgments to Tony Anghie for going through the article in its entirety, offering a generous read and extremely valuable comments; thanks also to the anonymous JIWS reviewer for the favorable review and useful suggestions. Finally, my thanks to S. Nanthikesan for suppressing his ambivalence regarding Rushdie in reading and commenting on several drafts of this paper through its various iterations. The views advanced in this piece are the author's alone.