Race, Empire, and the Making of Western Feminism

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Abstract

Traditions and practices of western feminism are steeped in histories of race and empire to such a degree that western movements can and should be thought of as expressions of “imperial feminism.” Slavery and imperial expansion helped to shape this phenomenon: women and men who sought female emancipation, and especially political rights, drew on images of the enslaved and colonized to make their case. Despite convictions about international sisterhood and the organizations to support it, non-western women were not viewed as equals. Those women had their own agendas which sometimes overlapped with western women’s movements but were more shaped by anti-colonial nationalist solidarities.

Introduction

The 2015 release of the film *Suffragette*, featuring Meryl Streep as Emmeline Pankhurst, brought historical accounts of a specific stage of the British feminist movement into the Anglophone public arena at the precise moment when #BlackLivesMatter was creating insurgencies in US streets and campuses and ISIS sympathizers were carrying out large and small attacks on civilians from Paris to California to Abuja in the name of anti-modernist jihad. But it was not this global conjuncture that generated controversy about the film’s engagement (or lack thereof) with the question of race and women’s emancipation. Rather, it was the T-shirt that many of the film’s stars were seen sporting – imprinted with Pankhurst’s memorable phrase “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave” – that sparked the most press and Twitter coverage. Radhika Sanghani wrote in the London *Telegraph* that Streep and the other actresses faced a backlash for failing to recognize how inappropriate it was for “four ‘privileged white women’ to compare sexism to racism in any way.” Becca at #MJStarLover tweeted that the quote “suggest[ed] that black people had the choice of enslavement, when we didn’t. So disrespectful.” Sanghani interviewed Anita Anand, author of a book about Sophia Duleep Singh, daughter of the Maharajah of Duleep Singh, who had been active in the British suffragette movement, as evidence that suffragism was not an entirely white project. Sanghani also interviewed several historians of suffrage on the subject, who turned almost immediately to the case of the US movement to talk about its vexed relationship to black suffrage and the challenges of southern racial politics that shaped the US women’s movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sanghani quoted Rebecca Ann Latimer Felton, the first woman to serve in the Senate: “I do not want to see a negro man walk to the polls and vote on who should handle my tax money, while I myself cannot vote at all” (Sanghani 2015).
The buzz around *Suffragette* reminds us of the challenges that scholars of feminism still face when it comes to the history of race and women’s movements. We’d do well to reflect on what public discourse around the film tells us about the persistence of narratives of feminism as a white western movement untouched by questions of race or the forces of empire. In fact, western feminist movements – capiously defined as a quest for political, social, and economic rights for women – were deeply enmeshed in histories and cultures of imperialism. The reasons for this are not far to seek. Western imperialism played a constitutive role in shaping political culture across the globe in the period 1776–1928, and feminism was no exception. More often than not, western feminists brought imperial attitudes and assumptions to their political and social commitments; these included hierarchies of value that discounted non-white women as agents of their own destiny, or at the very least, cast them as dependent and subject to tutelage by their western “sisters.” Colonized women had their own views of both rights and race, of course. Some sought solidarity with and inclusion in western women’s movements; others, mindful of contemporary western struggles, followed their own paths toward the vote, the education of girls, or simply the recognition of their own accomplishments in the public arena. Metaphors of rebel and slave were readily available to all those who sought to grapple with feminist politics in this period. But as one of the most significant cultural contexts in which women’s emancipation was imagined and operationalized, empire and the convictions about racial difference it carried gave those metaphors their meaning, for feminists and their critics alike.

**The Roots of Imperial Feminism**

“Imperial feminism” refers to the conscious and unself-conscious presumptions about western cultural and racial superiority that undergirded movements for women’s rights as they erupted into the public sphere as collective endeavors in the nineteenth century and after. Those movements emerged during the extended moment that western empires sought hegemony in India, Africa, and parts of Asia. Empire and feminism were, if not coterminous, then certainly historically coincident. Indeed, the Scramble for Africa was an important backdrop for English, French, and German women, many of whom saw opportunities for missionary activity, employment, or an entrée into contemporary political discourse about women’s role in the future of the nation. Some, like the German novelist Frieda Von Bulow, travelled to Africa; others, like social purity activist Josephine Butler, never went to any imperial outposts. But whether they were arm chair imperialists or not, European feminists understood that they needed to ally their cause with the imperial one in order to make women’s rights, and white women themselves, indispensable to the national-imperial enterprise. This might make them uneasy allies of imperial men: von Bulow defended her association with the racist and sadist Carl Peters and actively supported his colonial projects. It might make them advocates for colonized women, but rarely did they think of them as equals: Josephine Butler’s campaign against the CD Acts in India was predicated on the helplessness of Indian women and on the redemptive power of their English saviors (Wildenthal 2001; Burton 1994).

Convictions about racial superiority and about the necessity of racial purity were at the root of such initiatives. Those convictions ran deep, and were not simply the product of imperialism run rampant in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The historical fact of slavery, that brutal global system of displacement and migration, helped to shape western beliefs about the links between skin color and humanity, between blackness and fitness for rule, between whiteness and civilization. Of course, those connections are not natural: they were actively formed in the crucible of the slave trade itself, which existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries alongside white indenture and in the nineteenth, was supplanted by the indenture of people of Asian descent, both Indian and Chinese. Race was a convenient...
sorting mechanism, used to distinguish white from non-white, first in support of a plantation system that depended on slave labor and then of a system of global capital reliant on black bodies for the production of raw materials into consumable goods for western markets. The abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 1807 and the abolition of slavery itself in 1833 brought many English women into the public square as boycotters, protestors, and petitioners of parliament. They used the household purse as a lever for putting pressure on slave owners and their political representatives, and helped to circulate poignant images of the black man in chains who cried out “Am I not a man and a brother?” (Midgely 1992, 96). While they were sympathetic to enslaved women, they did not acknowledge their social equality; even more rarely did they collaborate with free black women to support the cause. Well beyond the official end of slavery, abolition in Britain remained an ideological and rhetorical touchstone for the English feminist movement. But the racial hierarchies of personhood – and womanhood – it enshrined persisted, arguably intensified by Victorian imperial expansion that relied on ideologies of racial and civilizational superiority for its justification, and on women as the carriers of those values as well.

As it did in debates about slavery, the civilizing mission played a consequential role in shaping cultures of female emancipation in the west and beyond. Christianity in its evangelizing mode had complex and changing relationships to the question of racial difference, complexities that can’t be easily summarized here. Christian missionaries fanned out across the globe to convert scores of local people whom they then tried to draw into a global communion. Their success is debatable, but they helped to create a cohort of native Christians with enormous impact on empire, nationalism, and postcolonial histories as well. At times missionaries were handmaidens of European hegemony; at times they allied with indigenous interests. But regardless of their sympathies, their purpose was the transformation of native life ways and cosmologies – the gendered social and sexual order included (Ballantyne 2014). What is significant for our purposes, then, are the forms of middle class, hetero-normative domesticity and conjugal order they promoted and tried to model across the landscapes of modern western imperialism.

The vast majority of western feminists were not missionaries, but they were Christians, and they shared the belief that Christian nations exemplified – or should exemplify – proper forms of female respectability whether in marriage or in celibate spinsterhood. They also held that the heathen colonized woman was the right and proper object of humanitarian intervention, whether it was to save her from her father or husband or to guide her toward education and self-reliance (or both). In the words of one British feminist writer, “woman is the lever, the infallible lever, by which sunken nations are upraised” (Burton 1994, 50). The fact that the women of “sunken nations” were typically racialized others gave a pathos and an urgency to this rescue mission. It also allowed western feminists who were seeking evidence of the indispensability of white women to the nation a platform through which to legitimize the cause of female emancipation. Demonstrating that they too had a vital role in the civilizing mission because of their unique access to colonized women was thus not merely a rhetorical strategy. It was a political practice rooted in traditions of abolition, sanctified by Christian cultural assumptions and catalyzed by the acceleration of western imperial ambition from the 1880s onwards – at the precise moment when European feminism was gaining traction, and adherents, as both a national phenomenon and an international movement.

**Fictions of Global Sisterhood**

Though the rhetoric of global sisterhood did not emerge until the early twentieth century, the idea that campaigns for female emancipation had the potential to link women worldwide...
undergirded the Victorian movement. In the British and American contexts, pre-histories of feminism rooted in abolition and exemplified by the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, fed the conviction that female emancipation was race-blind, that feminism meant universal equality for all women, and that white women were the best instruments for achieving that result on behalf of non-white female subjects. British feminists were arguably the most invested in such claims, chiefly through their concern for and patronage of Indian women. They viewed their colonized “sisters” as hapless victims of religious custom, specifically with respect to Hindu practices of child marriage, and as pawns in the imperial military complex of regulation, which targeted colonial women deemed prostitutes for medical inspection in order to try to control the spread of venereal disease among British soldiers. As regulation was an empire-wide scheme, it was not limited to India but it did focus on women of color, including Jewish and mixed race women, deemed licentious and in need of intrusive medical examination (Levine 2003). Though the scale of British imperial dominion was greater than that of other European nations, Englishwomen were not the only ones committed to demonstrating their use value to the imperial nation as mediators between western imperial agents and colonized populations. French women, for example, were involved in colonization schemes; and while some were critical of empire, they were also largely sympathetic to France’s colonial ambitions. Despite national differences among western feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they shared a conviction about the need to rescue colonial women from their plight and “to use colonial space to further the feminist cause” (Boittin 2010, 173).

In fact, wherever white women sought entrance into the public sphere as women, they referred to their capacity to represent the status and the fate of colonized women, whom they deemed racially other if not also racially inferior. Here representation had a double meaning: western feminists went to great lengths to learn about, write about and otherwise visualize colonial women for the broader publics from whom they sought recognition and legitimacy. Those acts of representation had not just racialized presumptions but political overtones, suggesting a capacity to represent the interests of colonized women in the arenas of governmentality to which they sought entrance. Those strategies of representation could also reveal metropolitan dependencies for anyone who cared to look. Nowhere is this clearer than in the feminist-sponsored National Exhibition of Women’s Labor in the Netherlands in 1898, which was intended as a space where women’s working knowledge and power could be displayed but which was, as well, a spectacular manifestation of how reliant the Dutch imperial enterprise was on Javanese labor, including the work of women (Grever and Waaldjik 2004). If the theater of European politics was gendered, racial difference and its uses were also continually on display, with non-white women held up as evidence of the need for western feminist representation in the halls of imperial power. In that sense, it was the racial hierarchies at the heart of western feminist thinking and writing and practice, rather than the principle of universal equality, that were global during the high tide of European imperialism.

Here women’s history, and feminist history more particularly, offers an opportunity to understand how discourses of the global have been shaped by the hardware of empire. For advocates of women’s suffrage were keen to create international organizations that showcased the cross-cultural reach of feminist ideas and brought like-minded women to the sightline of global publics so that the power of their collective movements might be more tangibly felt. Headquartered in London, the first conference of the International Suffrage Alliance was held in Washington DC in 1902. Taken together, the organization and the place underscore the Anglophone character of these early impulses; not only were the women in attendance mainly white, the US–Britain axis represented a kind of Anglo-Saxon imperium at the heart of “internationalism” – one which privileged some whites over others as the leaders of global
sisterhood by virtue of their imperial power on the world stage. Suffrage was not the only feminist cause that exceeded national boundaries; the members of the Ladies National Association of the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts had impressive transnational conference networks, though these were routinely Eurocentric as well. Beyond the west, crossing racial lines was more possible: the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association allowed for interracial friendships between white and non-white women in the interwar years. But interracial harmony was harder to come by. As the Maori delegate Victoria Bennett lamented, until reform-minded women resolved to leave nineteenth-century racial attitudes behind and embraced the proposition that “the human race is a single human family,” no permanent gains could be made (Paisley 2009, 127). Whatever possibilities there were for feminist movements to face their own racialist tendencies remained elusive before the 1930s, which means that global sisterhood was more fiction than fact into the first decades of the twentieth century at least.

Female Emancipation beyond Imperialism

Yet there were women who could not be mistaken for white who did identify as feminists, or female reformers, or emancipationists, or suffragists. As a label, feminism was relatively new even in the 1890s; it connoted both men and women who advocated for equal rights, broadly speaking. They might eschew suffragism but embrace women’s education. In Britain they might accept the term suffragist but reject suffragette, signaling their abhorrence of the kinds of physical violence or self-abnegation that the Pankhursts and others accepted as legitimate means of protest. The Singh sisters, Sophia and Catherine, were among the suffragette women who supported the Cause. They were the daughters of Maharajah Duleep Singh; their mother was of mixed German and Abyssinia origin, which made them something more than simply “Indian suffragettes.” Sophia wore suffragette dress and the signature “Votes for Women” badge; a famous photograph of her shows her selling the feminist newspaper, The Suffragette, in 1913. Like others in the women’s suffrage ranks, she was also an energetic tax resister (Mukherjee 2012, 106).

A number of Indian women moved in metropolitan feminist circles in the nineteenth and twentieth century, though not all subscribed so closely to the forms of activism their English “sisters” adhered to. Pandita Ramabai was a high-caste Hindu woman who came to Britain in the 1880s to be a doctor; she ended up becoming a social reformer whose cause was primarily the education of Indian women, specifically widows. Raden Kartini, an elite Javanese woman who wrote in Dutch about the need to challenge polygamy and create educational opportunities for women, was her contemporary, but she died young and her influence was mainly posthumous. Feminist consciousness did not require travel abroad or a spark from European acquaintances. Herabai Tata, born in Bombay in 1879, found her feminism in India, where she was the Honorary Secretary of the Women’s Indian Association, whence she lobbied for the franchise for Indian women. Though Indian women had participated in reform activities since the nineteenth century, the interwar years galvanized both Indian nationalists and Indian feminists, especially around issues of the vote and related causes. Given the Victorian history of imperial feminism, their relationships with British women could be fraught. The periodical Stri Dharma, which had two Indian women editors in the persons of Muthulakshmi Reddy and Srimati Malati Patwardhan, embodied some of these imperial tensions even as it aimed for a local and global audience of sympathizers and supporters (Ramusack 1992; Tusan 2007).

Though colonial women did circulate in metropolitan centers as travelers, students, or occasional visitors, they were typically comparatively elite women who may or may not have
came into contact with western feminists. As suggested above, international conferences were one potential site of encounter though again, attendance by non-white women was, if not rare, then by no means the norm for such gatherings, which were populated chiefly by women of European descent. That is to say, when western feminists envisioned a world of women bearing equal rights, they did so without deep or extensive personal knowledge of colonial women. And when they invoked them as the basis for their claims to participation, they did so on the basis of fictional or abstract ideas about the actual needs and circumstances of such women. In that sense, western feminists were effectively colonial knowledge brokers in a world where such knowledge was increasingly prized by policy makers and government officials and purveyors of all manner of consumables about empire in the metropole and the colony, as well as in the spaces in between. But even accurate knowledge was no guarantee against the racism that helped to define the very core of imperial feminism. This may in part explain the response of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage, upon hearing that the extension of the franchise to women in New Zealand applied technically to Maori women as well. “Why should the Maori women be in a position superior to that held by the women of England?” she asked (Adams 2014, 118). Such a reversal of the racial hierarchy was apparently as unacceptable as it was unthinkable in the western feminist imagination.

Feminist women outside the west, especially those invested in political rights and participation, developed their own organizations, often in connection with men’s nationalist groups, though not exclusively. Huda Shaarawi, who had been the head of the women’s committee of the Wafd party, helped to establish the Egyptian Feminist Union in the early 1920s that stood for equality, better education, and a social welfare agenda for women (Badran 1987). Women like Shaarawi and Muthu Reddy shared many of the values and platforms that their western “sisters” prized. They could be openly critical of empire nonetheless, though not typically on the grounds of its racism per se. As transnational networks developed and travel opportunities for women opened up in the twentieth century, there were more occasions for meaningful encounter between east and west, even while friction remained. As for occasions which brought non-western women together as activists without reference to or participation of European feminists – such as the Eastern Women’s Congresses in Damascus and Tehran – these happened chiefly in the 1930s and after (Weber 2008).

**Looking Forward toward the Feminist Past**

Despite popular amnesia about histories of race and empire that movies like *Suffragette* tend to reinforce, feminism as a political project and a social movement is steeped in the story of imperialism and its racial assumptions. Liberal feminism in particular has been so remarkably attached to an emancipatory sentimentalism that it seems all but impossible to re-ground it in the imperial realities whence it came. That sentimentalism helps produce a real myopia, so much so that Meryl Streep was moved to suggest that *Suffragette* should be shown in Middle Eastern countries, presumably to model for non-western women how women’s rights are accomplished. Her ignorance about the rich entangled histories of west and non-west feminism is painful to acknowledge. But it is representative rather than exceptional. As long as we occlude the facts of race and empire from our vision of the feminist past, we will be misled or worse, deluded, by the powerful fiction of tales like the one *Suffragette* seeks to tell. All we need to do is to remember that the first generations of western feminists were patently, even unabashedly, aware of their indebtedness to imperialism and the racial hierarchies it offered to help them justify how and under what terms white women should be accepted as full-fledged members of the body politic.
Select Bibliography


