

Friend or Foe?

The (In)Compatibility Between Cultural Relativist Theory and the Global Feminist Agenda

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Abstract:

The evolution of cultural relativist theory has played an important role in how social, political and economic issues are considered on a regional and global scale. As the world has become globally connected, the idea of cultural relativism has served to preserve social and cultural borders, as the philosophy rooted in ethics implies a level of understanding that can only be sought from within. However the act of validating social traditions and norms on a national scale, while the world continues to interconnect on an economic and political scale, has resulted in disproportions of the progression of certain social issues, a significant one being that of women's equality.

The specific impact of cultural relativism as an abstract concept on the practical discourse of human rights and intercultural understanding has been discussed and debated by researchers for years. Some scholars claim the philosophical theory to be outdated, while others ascertain its continued value, but there has been a significant lapse in research that outlines the diverse understandings of this theory as it relates to and impacts different feminist discourses around the globe. This thesis will attempt to take a step in closing that gap; to outline for the reader the many implementations and indications through which cultural relativist theory has been understood by feminists. This discussion will ultimately find that though cultural relativist theory has been used as a form of empowerment for some feminists around the globe, the limitations in its ability to serve the gender equality agenda vastly outweigh any assistance it might produce, ultimately finding cultural relativist theory incompatible with the global feminist cause.

Introduction: A Discussion of Culture and Relativism

To intelligently develop an argument revolving around the theory of cultural relativism, an already daunting discussion due to its inherently abstract nature, a base understanding of culture is fundamental. An unfounded and poorly constructed understanding of culture, as Xiaorong Li argues in his article “A Cultural Critique of Cultural Relativism”, is often used as a basis for supporting or discrediting cultural relativist theory. Proper insight into the constructs of culture is an essential first step in analyzing the validity of cultural relativist theory, as it is the foundation on which the philosophy was built (Li, 152).

Culture is often discussed in context with concepts such as “human rights” or “identity”, but is rarely given the same level of scrutiny in its delineation. For example, in a dialogue on global politics, business ethics or human rights, culture is an integral part of the conversation, however it is often indicative of an ambiguous referral to ideas of ‘community’, ‘tradition’, and ethical ‘norms’ (Li, 152). Seldom is culture warranted its own consideration in a discussion in which it is inherent, but rather it serves as a means to an end, that end usually being an analysis of another, less encompassing ideology.

For the sake of moving the point of focus along, it will be proposed that anthropologists and sociologists have (for the most part) agreed upon a generally accepted definition of culture. Li defines this “minimalist conception” view of culture as

a body of informal knowledge that is historically inherited, transformed, embodied, and contested in traditions, incorporated and innovated in practices, and transmitted, altered through social learning, in a community of evolving and porous boundaries. Li, 153

It should be mentioned that this description is derived from the largely contested arguments and discussions that surround culture, of which there are two generalized schools of classification: the classic school and the contemporary school. The classic classification of culture, inspired by 18th-century Johann von Herder and proponed by scholars such Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, maintains that culture is an internally bound, time-insensitive entity. The contemporary (and superiorly accepted) identification of culture defines it as “open and influenced from outside—its borders, if any, are porous and fluid; it changes over time; and it is internally heterogeneous” (Li, 153).

Li maintains three paradoxes that are crucial to a thorough understanding of his basic conception of culture, and I ask that the reader keep them in mind for the duration of this paper:

The first occurs when we see on the one hand that a culture can be unique to a community but on the other hand that it can also overlap and be compatible with other cultures. The second arises when we see that a culture can be uniform or have unity but that it can also have its own internal heterogeneity and permit individualization in the community. The final paradox comes into view when we see that a culture has its own roots, continuity, and conservation but that it also permits self-criticism by the members of the community, leading to (potential) transformations within it and to the formation of hybrid traditions with different origins or histories. (Li, 154)

These paradoxes of culture are extremely significant to consider when discussing the implications of culture among ethical and moral values, an implicit parallel in the arguments pertaining to cultural relativism.

As Dominic Mele' discusses in his work, "Cultural Diversity and Universal Ethics in a Global World", the principles that make up cultural relativist theory have been discussed by philosophers for hundreds of years, but the roots of cultural relativism as understood today can be linked most strongly to famous philosopher Immanuel Kant, when he insisted that morality should be maintained on a universal level. Ultimately, Kant tied a moral system of beliefs to human rationality, called the Categorical Imperative, and these beliefs set off a chain of influential thought in the ways Western ethical philosophers perceived the rest of the world throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Mele', 682).

In the 1770s, Johann von Herder, a student of Kant's, committed a number of his works to the discussion of culture as a socially influential construct, and contributed to the argument that the human experience was influenced not only by universal moral standards, as Kant argued, but by cultural structures as well. This theory was expanded by several of his students, specifically by William Sumner who first coined the term "ethnocentrism" in the late 19th century. Sumner argued that cultural boundaries greatly influenced the way individuals view the world; one's own cultural experience is the epicenter of their perception around which every other societal construct is judged (Mele', 684).

Franz Boas, a German anthropologist and philosopher, first constructed the modern understanding of cultural relativist theory in 1887, when in his work

"The Principles of Ethnological Classification," he wrote "...the main object of ethnological collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (Boas, 1887). Boas used this idea as an axiom in his later writings surrounding cultural understanding and morality. The actual term "cultural relativism", however, was not coined until the first few decades of the 20th century, when American anthropologists and philosophers like Alain Locke and Melville Herskovits used the phrase to deconstruct cultural identity.

Cultural relativist theory popularized in the years following World War I. Western (especially American) anthropologists struggled to understand the clash in culture and international affairs that contributed to the catastrophic conflict in the western part of the world. Cultural relativism developed as a way of understanding the paradox between the individual's view of their own normative beliefs and practices, and the view of every other cultural practice against their own (Mele', 683). Cultural relativism was thus *established as the principle that a culture's values, practices, and beliefs can only be fully understood by others from the perspective of the individuals within that culture.*

It is imperative to now differentiate between the ideologies of cultural relativism and moral relativism, which are certainly related but by no means the same philosophical concept. It is worth pointing out that moral relativism is a theory first conceptualized by Aristotle, and refers to moral paradigms based on the individual experience. Cultural relativism, while certainly correlated with

moral and social values, is a philosophical ideology that was developed much later, and which was fundamentally used as a tool of heuristics and methodology (Brems, 140).

Throughout the mid-20th century, American and European scholars have altered the ways in which cultural relativist theory is experienced. Where it began as a method of understanding the purposes behind different cultural practices and values, it slowly emerged into an end principle of its own accord, and cultural relativism became more of an idea or completed agenda than a method of consideration (Lako, 10). In this way cultural relativism has come to be considered erroneously with moral relativism, a detrimental fallacy in understanding because ethical implications are only one piece of the giant puzzle that makes up a society's culture.

Much as cultural relativism itself has been shaped over the past century, so has it been used by anthropologists, scholars, and political leaders to promote different motivations throughout the world. Cultural relativism has influenced several factions of societies and the way they function on a national and international level (Mele', 681). In specific relation to human rights, and more so to women's equality, different understandings of cultural relativist theory have contributed to the structure of the feminist agenda within the nation-state, as well as affected the interaction between these agendas on a global scale.

I will stop here to make a few clarifications that will set an understanding for the core of this work. There are several expert scholars and groups of academics focused on cultural relativist theory and the way it relates and

engages with other systems, including feminist theory. These theorists have largely transcended the somewhat extremist perception of cultural relativism that we will be discussing here, and have a more sophisticated take on the topic. However I stress that it is not this small minority of experts worth reflecting on nearly so much as the larger, far less enlightened public of activists and scholars who perceive and shape cultural relativist theory in the more radical way as will be discussed below. Therefore I disclose that my picture of cultural relativism implications is not the only one to be found and analyzed, but rather a more common and actively discussed perception.

As feminist scholars, activists, and citizens will be referred to heavily in the duration of this paper, I will clarify to the reader that the women I am referring to are in general of the middle class in each given society. This is not to exclude the importance of gender movements of the lower class or of the upper echelons of society, but merely to shape this discussion around feminists of the size and agency that carry the most weight in general national feminist discourse. The duration of this paper will serve to analyze what I argue are the relevant and influential meanings behind cultural relativism in its direct relation to feminist discourse.

- 1) Cultural relativist theory can be used as a proponent against the dangers of universalism and as an empowerment tool for national feminists (meaning feminists whose primary objective is the promotion of gender equality within the confines of their own country).

On the other, perhaps more heavily weighted side of the scale,

- 2) Cultural relativism reaches a severe limitation in promoting the feminist agenda on a national level when we analyze the inherent patriarchal nature of most cultures around the globe.
- 3) Internationally, cultural relativist theory reinforces the global hierarchy system and maintains an inability for feminists to connect cross-culturally.

To prove each of these outcomes, this thesis will delve into the effectual interactions between women's (in)equality and the several discourses cultural relativism takes. For reference to a global community, I will use four nation-states and their current feminist agendas as a sample to prove the different roles cultural relativist theory has played in shaping national and cross-cultural conditions: The United States, Norway, Iran, and India. These nations are strategically chosen as they represent different positions in the global order; geographically, economically, politically, and of course, culturally. For the readers understanding, I'll go into a brief explication of the current feminist agenda in these nations, for appropriate referral once paired with the cultural relativist connotations.

Let's begin with the United States. As scholar Eva Brems discusses in her work, "Enemies or Allies? Feminism and Cultural Relativism as Dissident Voices in Human Rights Discourse," The U.S. is largely attributed with the spread of the notions behind first and second wave feminism. The United States' fight for women's equality took off in the first part of the 20th century, and aligned itself with France and much of Western Europe (Brems, 140). Throughout the past

century, and especially within the last 50 or so years, the feminist movement in the U.S. has had several different branches, but has maintained a few common threads that hold into contemporary times. For one thing, the feminist movement in the United States ascertains the exact equality between men and women, despite physical gender differences. The sentiment of exact likeness, capabilities, and contributive qualities has been a unifying factor of different strands in post-modern U.S. feminism, and distinguishes them from their European counterparts (Brems, 144). A focus on diminishing or overcoming differences, rather than accepting them as a part of gender construction, has been a reoccurring theme of feminism in the United States over the past century.

Throughout the past 20-30 years, scholars and activists in the U.S. have run into denunciation for being “white-washed” or lacking a “transnational” understanding of women’s equality.

For instance, the age-old problem of the representation of non-Western women as victims of cultural oppression circulates in popular culture and media representations in ways that are autonomous of state agendas. These representations then circulate and are deconstructed within women’s studies classrooms. –
Fernandes, 142

The struggle of American feminists to counteract this criticism will be more heavily discussed later, but inclusive efforts at multicultural feminism have certainly contributed to contemporary women’s equality movements in the U.S.

The next nation-state that will be referred to throughout this thesis is Norway. The chosen representative of Europe, Norway has extensive state programs that promote equality and access to fundamental needs, such as

healthcare. Repeatedly seen at the top of social equity lists by organizations such as the World Health Organization and the UN, Norway has some of the highest reports of citizen satisfaction in the world (Smale, 3).

Discussing the issue of cultural relativism and women's equality from a technologically and socially advanced nation is a useful opposition to those nations with comparably less social equity. Note that this is not a claim to use Norway as the end goal or symbol of complete equality, for research clearly shows that this nation still has a long way to go before reaching total equality (Smale, 1). However it does represent a certain level of social equity that has yet to be attained by other parts of the world, and thus their cultural values and political practices are worth looking into.

Norway (and indeed much of Scandinavia and the greater part of Western Europe) has employed similar feminist movements and theories on gender equality as the United States, with a few key aspects that set it apart (and have perhaps made it more successful). It is true that Norway is also a proponent of the segmentation of first and second wave feminism; the first focusing on gender rights and equality in marriage and in voting, and the second being the fight for gender equality in the workforce and overall social status. However unlike the United States, Norway feminists have structured their fight for equality with an acceptance and appreciation for the differences between the male and female genders. (Brems, 138).

They stress women's difference from men rather than equality of the sexes. Real equality, as opposed to formal equality, takes this difference into account and values it. Various measures are proposed

for the introduction of the female difference approaching to the human rights system. - Brems, 138.

While women's rights activists in the U.S. tend to negate or override gender differences in the fight for equality, those in Norway have argued that sex differences are natural and beneficial to a more complete understanding of gender, and have used this acceptance of difference to further their cause (Lako, 10).

In addition to Norwegian feminists embracing gender difference as a key methodology in the fight for equality, they have also taken a more transnational approach to carrying out the feminist agenda, through the simultaneous promotion of national anti-discrimination laws for both ethnic and gender minorities. "Norway has recently merged its efforts to promote gender equality with intentions to address discrimination and inequality based on grounds such as ethnic background" (Garton, 88). However despite these attempts at a minority-embracing feminist movement, Norway still faces transnational challenges in their current feminist agenda. There are substantially fewer women than men in Norwegian politics, and even less ethnic minority representation. Finally, women in Norway are given a higher level of respect and compensation for domestic roles than in other parts of the world; but they still take on the majority of the domestic workload (Smale, 3).

Iran, the third nation that will be highlighted, takes a far different approach to the fight for women's equality than the United States or Norway. While there are many different strands of Iranian feminism, much as there are many

different strands of feminism in every country, the majority falls under Islamic feminism. Beginning in the 19th century and making significant strides over the past several decades, Islamic feminists have progressed the political and social norms of Muslim majority nations. Islamic Iranian feminists have been attempting to restructure the oppressive aspects of their culture for hundreds of years, through deconstruction of religious texts and refinement of gender roles (Hidayatullah, 122).

The Qur'an has played a key role in allowing women's rights activists in Iran to preserve religion as a crucial part of identity and culture, serving as an empowerment tool rather than a hindering artifact in the rational for gender equity.

I notice common interests in seeking the liberatory potential of texts while also honestly confronting their androcentric elements; directly accessing texts to bypass and change patriarchal readings of them, thus subverting the interpretive monopoly of (male) elites who have been treated as the only rightful or qualified readers of texts. -
Hidayatullah, 128

The connection between Iranian feminists and the Islamic faith has caused some negative speculation from the western world, specifically from American feminists, many of whom argue that a devotion to religion and gender equality is not possible (Hidayatullah, 128). Islamic feminists have fought these claims, writing them off as uniformed eurocentrism, but this rift in feminist movements has caused a lack of understanding and solidarity in the global feminist movement.

Currently, women's rights activists in Iran work with religious organizations and national NGOs to promote social equity programs and national laws that give women higher standing and consideration in national affairs, resulting in such foundations as the Million Signatures Campaign and the introduction of Women's Studies departments in universities (Frick, 560).

The final nation to serve as a case study in this work will be India. As a large and historically rich nation, India's cultural history includes an ancient caste system and western imperialism. The struggle for gender equity in India is long and multi-factioned.

Scholars agree that it is very difficult to measure the 'status of women' especially in the context of a large and diverse country such as India . While women in India theoretically enjoy a number of legal rights, in practice these are denied to them... While some Indian women have attained prestigious posts in the judiciary, education, politics, IT, medicine and other myriad fields, these benefits are denied to the majority of women in the country. - Gangoli, 6

These four nations make up an overview of different feminist agendas throughout the world, reflecting key differences in culture, geography, and political and economic influence. While certainly not a complete picture of global feminism, it is expansive enough to serve the purpose of proving the implications and contributions cultural relativist understandings have on different parts of the world and their feminist discourses.

The duration of this paper will tackle in detail the different implications cultural relativist theory has had on the feminist agenda in these four nations, as indicators of the global community. Starting with the positive influence cultural

relativism has had for women's rights activists, I will discuss how the philosophy has served to fight the potential drawbacks of universalism and allow for relative cultural values and different discourses of advancement to flourish. Then, I will move into the negative implications of cultural relativist theory, considering its destructive influence on the feminist agenda on both a national and international level. Finally, I will make conclusive remarks as to the nature of cultural relativism in terms of what it has done to ultimately hinder the global feminist movement, and what can come of it in the future.

Part I: Cultural relativism as a proponent against universalism and as an empowerment tool for various feminist discourses.

As with any deep-rooted ideology or philosophical understanding, it is necessary to first understand its benefits and/or reasons for evolving into common acceptance before looking to pull apart and outline its discreditable features. Cultural relativist theory, as previously discussed, first evolved as a method for understanding other cultures. It is important to keep in mind this theory was primarily developed by western philosophers looking to understand

other areas of the world. Because it derived of a sense of Eurocentric awareness, cultural relativism must be looked at in the context in which it was created: as a tool to help Western philosophers, particularly American scholars, overcome or compensate for a sense of superiority in western culture.

That being said, the sentiments of cultural relativism were quick to spread throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, and though cultural relativism as a whole has been discredited in favor of more globally encompassing ideologies, its impact and influence remains a prominent source of understanding cultural and cross-cultural associations. Additionally, the problems which cultural relativism rose in response to are still largely in existence (Lako, 5). This idea of attributing intrinsic value to different societies around the world began as a method of understanding, but it soon evolved in the mid 20th century into an ideology of its own accord. Cultural relativism changed its orientation from being an anthropological tool, to being the end result (Boas, 1884). Accepting cultures as intrinsically valuable relative to their own communities, was not how cultural relativism started, but it became an underlying current that attached itself to the philosophy.

Perhaps the most commonly attributed benefit to a cultural relativist way of thinking is its inherent counteraction to the concept of universalism. Universalism, a term that denotes religious, theological, and philosophical perceptions with unanimous application or applicability, was primarily and historically discussed in religious contexts (Browning, 5). The idea of a universal “savior”, or of an inherent “salvation” at the end of one’s life has been endorsed

over the centuries by several religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. However, the concept soon transcended its many religious implications and became referential to cultural concepts and social and political philosophy (Browning, 6).

For an idea to be universal, it must maintain importance and value across a global scale. As editor Don Browning discusses in his book of collective essays, “Universalism vs. Relativism: Making Moral Judgments in a Changing, Pluralistic, and Threatening World”, the ideas around which universalism is examined tend to have highly cultural and moral implications (Browning, 3). Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to entertain universalizing a moral or cultural practice without in the process negating the value of every other practice in its shared category.

The lack of plurality in authentication as a result of universalism then raises the importance of unanimity, or a shared understanding and agreement of what these universal values may be. Disregarding for the moment the fact the sheer unlikelihood of any kind of global consensus on questions pertaining to cultural values, the legitimacy of unanimity must also be called into question. In fact, the immediate relationship between unanimous agreement and moral correctness is an outright fallacy in logic, one that has been made several times in the course of human history (Browning, 23).

And but a few decades back, one could have quite readily reached a global consensus that women are a second class of citizen. Hence one cannot reliably build cross-cultural moral judgments (indeed any) based on consensus. – Browning, 23

Thus universalism is a dangerous platform to stand on, for the very basis on which it is precariously balanced does not hold up to any kind of ethical scrutiny based on 'consensus', 'unanimity', or 'universal agreement'.

Universalism by its own nature purges differences in cultural behaviors, principles, and social constructs. While there is certainly some value in a global standard of human rights (something I will address more fully later), the universalism agenda is concerned far beyond the constructs of basic humanity, and discourages multicultural acceptance, particularly for the less economically developed parts of the world (Melé, 682). Cultural relativism has combatted the impulse of technologically advanced countries to mistakenly promote their ideals as the only potentially successful or "winning" ideals, particularly in the last century, when the World Wars caused the biggest clash of cultures in the world's modern history (Brems, 146).

Cultural relativism argues that a culture's intricacies and practicalities can only be understood from a point within that culture. From this understanding, it discredits the Universalist's assumption that there could ever be one implicitly primary way of experiencing society, so long as there is more than one society that makes up the world (Browning, 24). The importance of this manner of thinking is instrumental in fighting prejudice and protecting different constructs of history and knowledge.

In serving to refute properties of universalism, Cultural relativism validates practices and principles in different societies around the globe. Specifically as second wave feminism hit nations like The United States and much of Western

Europe in the 1960s, questions revolving around the proper manner of fighting for women's equality took shape, and the bigger question of a single global feminist agenda was argued by many western feminists.

Activists in the United States especially have pushed a Universalist structure onto the rest of world (Abdulhadi, 24). Many American feminists have become increasingly critical towards those activist groups who choose not to prioritize their equality campaigns based around western values, such as secularism. As mentioned previously, many Islamic feminist groups specifically face severe criticism from those women's rights activists of the western world, who claim that a dual loyalty to religious sanctions and women's equality isn't truly possible (Abdulhadi, 24). The implications behind cultural relativist theory have been used in these instances to counter the claims of there being one 'best' or 'only' way to fight for women's equality.

Some nonwestern academics and Islamic feminists respond to American feminist rejection by claiming it to be a kind of prejudice that results from an eagerness to discard any attempt of an outside, "non-western" culture to contribute to a cause currently dominated by the western world (Herr, 4). Author Ranjoo Herr discusses in her work, *"Reclaiming Third World Feminism: Or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism."* the misguided American assumption is that Islamic culture is inherently suppressive; therefore any argument tied to Islam must likewise be corrupt.

"...historical and contextual factors related to the imperialist relationship between the United States and the Arab world have

produced distinct forms of racism against and criminalization of individuals and communities perceived to be Arab or Muslim, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.” -Abdulahadi, 22

The colonial past between the western and nonwestern parts of the world have produced strained relations between different cultures, creating rifts even among mutual causes like women’s equality.

Women’s studies professor Lila Abu-Lughod has written much about the dichotomy between American feminists and those in the Muslim world, and has specifically reflected on the cultural relativist response many Islamic feminists have taken to oppose the oppressive critiques of American activists (Abu-Lughod, 783). In her article “*Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*” *Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others*”, Abu-Lughod argues a need to “develop, instead, a serious appreciation of differences among the women of the world- as products of different histories, expressions of different cultures, and manifestations of differently structured desires” (Abu-Lughod, 783). Abu-Lughod captures perfectly the cultural irony in American condemnation of Islamic repression in when she says,

To draw some analogies...why are we surprised that Afghan women do not throw off their burqas when we know perfectly well that It would not be appropriate to wear shorts to the opera...As anthropologists know perfectly well, people wear the appropriate form of dress for their social communities and are guided by socially shared standards, religious beliefs, and moral ideals, unless they deliberately transgress to make a point or are unable to afford proper cover. If we think U.S. women live in a world of choice regarding clothing, all we need to do is remind ourselves of the expression, ‘the tyranny of fashion’. - Abu-Lughod, 785

What is crucial about this statement is her remark on our perception of normalcy for “ourselves” and normalcy for “others.” There is a significant need in understanding what makes up the differences between the two, a need that is at least partly addressed by cultural relativist theory. American activists understand that attire is a direct expression of culture, yet many still struggle to accept the possibility of empowerment and progress in a culture with oppressive aspects different from their own.

Using important aspects of one’s culture to progress social issues may indeed be the most significant piece of the equality puzzle. For instance, the Islamic faith is a cornerstone of Iranian society. Since the establishment of the “so-called” Islamic Republic, Iran has seen serious gains in literacy, decreases in birth rates, presence of women in professions and in government, and feminist takes in culturally rich industries like writing and filmmaking (Abu-Lughod, 788). While it is not clear if this progress is because of or instead of the Islamic state, the fact remains that Islamic feminists have used religious texts and conventions to promote their cause for equality. And while most developed societies certainly have stands of feminism wrapped in a religious overcoat, the Muslim world is unique in its employment of religion as their main faction (Frick, 563). They have used an important aspect (the Islamic faith) of their culture as a strengthener to further another agenda, being women’s equality, and this relative approach has ended in results.

Indian feminists have experienced similar levels of success in using their own cultural practices to advance women’s equality and fight their own patriarchal

systems. As Jivan Venda discusses in her extensive research work on feminist legal theory in the Asian Pacific, over the past few decades women in India have employed sentiments from international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and used them to work their national legal system into providing more protective rights for women (Venda, 103). Venda discusses in detail,

...the dilemma posed by the question of who should challenge local, traditional cultural practices and which practices should be challenged because they are harmful to women. Should feminists ignore local cultural traditions and practices at the expense of those traditions and practices, or should States uphold the traditions and practices of their populations and such laws which protect these at the expense of gender equality? – Venda, 103

What she finds through her research is that the Indian feminist is quite capable of forwarding her gender equity campaign by maneuvering the legal system and dismissing traditions and practices as she sees fit.

The problem is being resolved in practice by women plaintiffs themselves, litigating at the domestic level. Women in the region are using their domestic legal systems to identify the cultural practices and traditions that discriminate against them and to challenge these practices and traditions. Driven by a degree of judicial activism, this has, in turn, led to encouraging judicial responses.- Venda, 104

Women in India have struck a balance between preserving their culture and forwarding the agenda for women's equality. As the very members of the society they wish to improve, national feminists are able to most appropriately adapt

their efforts to political and social norms, while preserving the cultural standards they deem meaningful.

Finally, cultural relativists argue that since there are no legitimate cross-cultural standards, outsiders should not judge the moral rules and social institutions of others. Therefore, for cultural relativists, the only valid way to effectuate change in cultural practices is from within the local community, for example, as a result of the impetus of local women. – Venda, 112

Norwegian women also have benefited from the cultural differences endorsed by cultural relativism. As the first nation in the world to pass an enforceable national gender equity law in 1979, Norway created an ombudsman and a complaints committee to hold the law accountable (Garton, 14). Norway also has on average the smallest gender pay gap in the world, and some of the highest levels of female representation in government, at nearly 40% (World Economic Forum, 2014). Finally, and while certainly not an example of perfect gender equity, Norway does boast the third smallest gender gap in the world according to the World Economic Forum 2014 Gender Gap Index (Note the gender gap index is compiled through outcome variables including health, education, economic participation and political empowerment.) The first and second nation-states on the list were Iceland and Finland, Nordic countries with comparable cultural and political values.

These factors are tied to cultural relativism because Norway has often been a global leader in social equity programs related to women's equality, frequently years before the rest of the world (western and nonwestern) had made women's

equality a serious priority. Throughout the past few decades, western nations have continually followed Norway's lead or made similar political changes in an attempt to advance their own women's rights agendas (Garton). Scandinavian countries especially seem to bounce off one another in their social equity movements, which could be a direct result of the cultural relativist idea that one's cultural values and practices can only be truly understood from within the given culture. At any rate, Norway has used its unique social, economic, and political positioning to further their feminist agenda at a faster pace than the rest of the world, something that may have been delayed in a more universalist, culturally streamlined global order.

When discussing how the implications of cultural relativism have benefited the global feminist agenda, The United States is a difficult nation to include. Discussing the beneficiary elements of cultural relativism in relation to the United States is practically meaningless, since the entire principal of cultural relativism derived largely in response to colonizing western culture (specifically the U.S.) over the rest of the world. The U.S. is the source of most 'modern' Universalist ideals, thus is it in no danger of losing any cultural significance or influence that might be protected by cultural relativist theory. Therefore, we will not be discussing how cultural relativist associations have benefited the United States; since it's only direct service (which we will touch upon later) has been to validate those American scholars who created the theory as a way of understanding cultures in other parts of the world.

Part II: Cultural relativism as an ultimately incompatible ideology with the feminist agenda on a national level, due to the inherent patriarchal nature of cultural constructs

It has thus been covered that the cultural relativist theory has redeeming attributes, mainly in its natural impact of preserving difference in cultural practices and values and in its prevention of cultural imperialism (Venda, 110).

However, cultural relativism comes with its fair share of complications and negative indications, which I will now outline in parallel with the state of women's inequality. For the purposes of a progressive work, I will initially delve into the impact of cultural relativist theory as a proponent of marginalization and suppression of women within national borders.

The major argument I formulate in this section is that though cultural relativist theory has been successfully employed by feminists around the world as a source of empowerment, the theory ultimately proves incompatible with the overall goals of women's equality. On a theoretical level, the two discourses are conflicting, due to the very nature out of which cultural relativism derived: a desire to better understand, preserve, and validate culture. The inherently patriarchal constructs which make up every lasting culture in the world make an embrace of both the relativist and feminist philosophy nonsensical; for to be successful long-term, the national and/or global feminist must find empowerment that transcends existing cultural attachments. In other words, achieving women's equality is, in its most self-serving form, a battle which must be independent of androcentric roots.

Despite being a philosophical advocate for the preservation of differences in culture, cultural relativism inevitably leads to the very different but still related issue of moral relativism, which then in turn contributes to the suppression of cultural minority groups, including and focusing on women, in all states. The cultural relativist wisely disengages from any sense of a universal, ethnocentric cultural validity, but they also negate any claim to the sentiment of universal

“human rights” (Brems, 137). The drive for a universal standard of human rights is something which has been discussed for several decades, and has become increasingly debated by scholars and activists as globalization has brought nations together on a more intimate scale. Many feminists critique the manner in which the universal human rights agenda has been considered; they claim it has primarily been a discussion by men, for men.

Human rights are not what they claim to be, feminists say. They are a product of the dominant male half of the world, framed in their language, reflecting their needs and aspirations. Whereas the "rights of man" as originally conceived by the great liberal thinkers were not intended to include women, today's "universal human rights" still overlook them as a matter of fact. The feminist critique of human rights thus basically argues for the inclusion of women in the human rights protection system. Feminists of all strands' advance various means to realize this aim. – Brems, 137

If the feminist discourse is wary of the current human rights agenda, it is also highly critical of cultural relativism at its basic intent; that of validating culture for the sake of protecting differences. It is here, then, that the feminist discourse has a fundamental issue with cultural relativism.

Feminists maintain that all theories based on equality or differences make the same mistake of using a "male yard stick." They warn against valuing differences which are a product of a patriarchal society, which needs to be dismantled- Brems, 140

It is worth asking the reader to recall the origin of cultural relativist theory at this time, and worth pointing out that the discourse was presented by

(predominately) white western males, in an attempt to reconcile previous colonization and discretization with other cultures (Brems). Cultural relativism was created by the western aggressor, as an attempt to feign enlightenment and transcultural appreciation, without the female gender in mind. And while a universal human rights has never been agreed upon or successfully completed, it can be proclaimed that there are certain aspects of culture that are inherently reflective of collective moral values, and these moral values are a basis against which a culture might be reasonably judged (Melé, 688).

Cultural relativism, at its most restrictive interpretation, refutes the possibility of any outsider's ability to properly understand a culture. Without an understanding, the outsider's perspective or judgment on the practices and values of the culture can have no real weight. If we accept this understanding of the philosophy, we must also conclude that cultural relativism at its core is incompatible with even the most basic universal standard of human rights. We must accept that the moral code embedded in each culture is capable of being read only by those to whom the code applies, and therefore a critique, or even a conversation, of morality and values between cultures becomes difficult. This difficulty may have been easily overlooked or overshadowed in times past, but as the globe becomes increasingly interdependent economically, politically, and socially, this impossibility of understanding as implied by cultural relativism must be addressed.

The very basis of cultural relativism proclaims a negation of an outside understanding, the international effects of which we will focus on later. Because

of a constant position of being an unenlightened “other” to different nation-states, the idea of globalized morality is one that has for the most part remained abstract in conception and in practice. The lack of unity in the moral values implicit within a culture, which cultural relativism inherently promotes, may have preserved certain cultural bodies of knowledge and methods of understanding, as discussed previously. However, a lack of universal ethics in the service of protecting culture has also served to prevent a strong international, multicultural front for the global social movements, including and of course focusing on that of women’s equality. The remainder of this section will provide an analysis of the four sample nations in an attempt to prove the deep interconnectedness of a nation’s culture with such patriarchal ties as makes it counter-conducive to simultaneously advance the women’s agenda and safeguard the separation of nations as promoted by cultural relativism.

The inevitability of moral relativism as promoted by cultural relativism will be first explicated through feminist movements in the United States. First wave feminism is usually attributed to beginning with the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, and it ran until women gained the right to vote in 1920. While the “wave” structure of American feminism is largely criticized, and considered by many scholars to be an outdated way of measuring the fluid process of women’s campaign for equality, they do give a certain historical context that makes grouping trends significantly easier (Fernades, 33). One of the biggest issues scholars observe while studying American feminist movements is the exclusionary propensity of activists, towards any non-white female population.

Throughout American history, national issues have often been structured by feminists through political interpretations of gender and sexuality, used to increase their own gentrified agendas.

Women usually have an ambivalent position within the collectivity...they often symbolize the collective unity, honor and the *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects, like going to war. On the other hand, however, they are often excluded from the collective "we" of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position...In this sense the construction of womanhood has a property of "otherness." – Fernandes, 36.

American feminists have resented this "otherness" since their fight for equality took off. In an effort to provide a complete parallel to their male counterparts and prove an exact sameness in value and quality of person, white feminists have historically aligned themselves with the values of the nation at the time, values that until recently discriminated wholly against minorities of color or non-western ethnicities (Frick, 534). Therefore, in order to advance the women's agenda, the feminist movements have distributed the quality of "otherness" onto minority groups amongst themselves, choosing to integrate into existing American cultural values rather than push ideals of gender and racial equality onto the nation.

For the Third World woman, who has, at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment. Its followers are notorious for "adopting" women of color as their "cause" while still expecting us to adapt to their expectations and their language. - *Gloria Anzaldua, This Bridge Called My Back*, 137

This white-washed version of the women's movement naturally resulted in the alienation of many other groups for the sake of acceptance by the dominant political culture. Justified by some as picking the "smaller evil" for the "greater good", this example of resulting moral relativity in the American feminist movement did succeed in granting white women the right to vote, as well as other relative victories throughout the 20th century (Fernades, 35). However these advances were at the expense of furthering degradation and inequality for millions of American women, and in this way it can be understood that the goals or values of a society's mainstream culture are not always in the service of every member of that culture or society.

Apart from academic research, ethics in culturally diverse and global environments may require the opening of closed attitudes too strongly secluded in technical and economics viewpoints, for they display certain disregard for what we have in common as humans.
Melé, 686

Those who suffer from oppression often seek to rise above other suppressed groups, and in this way American feminism has long struggled to paint a completed picture of the fight for women's equality. The chain of suppression continues from men to women, women to minority women, and so on. This lack of unity is consistent in sub-cultural agendas throughout the globe, and it is a main indicator of why the major values or systems of a culture are not always adequately empowering for the many groups of people within that culture.

Even for white women in the U.S., the women's movement has a long history of being put on the back burner for the sake of the national agenda. It has often been asserted in American culture (by politicians, men, and women alike) that a simultaneous focus on the feminist movement and on national issues (such as war or economic depression) is not possible or conducive to the overall welfare of society. Activists have of course challenged this manner of thinking since the early 20th century; however it does prove a point that even while excluding minority women, the right to fight for equality has continually been put on hold for the interest of nearly every other national issue (Frick, 562). Because the values of the dominant members of a collective society will always outweigh the interests of the existing oppressed, the ideals or ethics of a culture have not always reflected those of the women within that culture, nor have they always left open room for those women to bring new ideas or concerns to the political table.

Women in India have also struggled to advance their position society within the constraints of the nation-state's historical and cultural context. Despite using several aspects of Indian culture to strengthen their campaign for gender equality and women's empowerment, Indian women have a long history of struggle against cultural implications that make it difficult for activists to close the gender gap (Gangoli, 78).

In her discussion of legal feminist theory and cultural relativism, Jivan Venda argues that the cultural relativist argument is "half the picture" to how Indian feminists have fought for their equality within the practice of their own culture. Venda argues that though Indian culture is a key part of the Indian feminist's

identity, it is not wholly within these cultural bounds that women in India are able to express themselves and further the feminist agenda.

The individual rights of women, particularly in many non-western countries, are secondary to the community's rights as human dignity is preserved not through individual rights but through membership in a community. - Venda, 113

The feminist agenda for Indian women has often been lost in the interest of holding onto older, patriarchal traditions, such as polygamy (which has been outlawed for Hindu citizens, but remains legal for Muslims, a dynamic which has promoted a shift to the Islamic faith in some parts of the nation) and child marriage, and even basic traditions regarding household domesticity (Gangoli, 113). The problem for Indian feminists comes in their attempts to rectify traditional, patriarchal aspects of their culture with other aspects of their individuality, an identity crisis that many feminist scholars argue cannot be solved from an internal perspective alone, but rather from a rational inclusion of legal and universal sources as well.

The body of feminist legal theory which focuses on the preservation of cultural diversity does so because of a desire to value the experiences of different women. Accordingly, supporting those women who oppose certain aspects of their culture is in accord with feminist objectives and those perspectives must be included in defining universal human rights. -Venda, 113

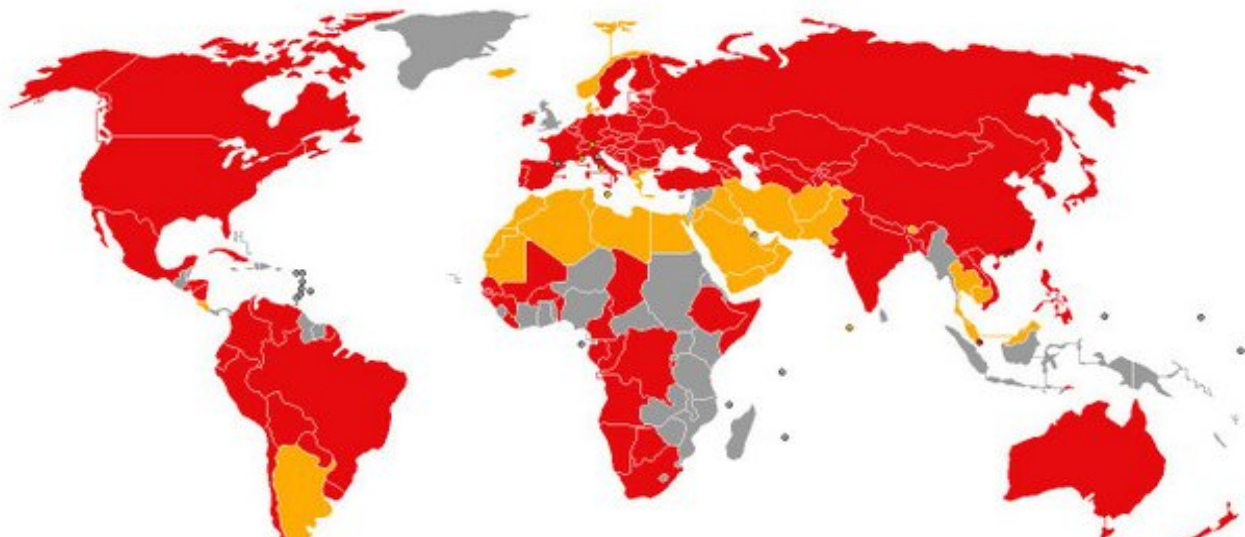
Thus, while respecting and preserving the desires, cultural backgrounds, and experiences of different women around the globe is a crucial factor in shaping the

global feminist agenda, it is nevertheless important to think of women's equality as a goal or entity in and of itself, and one that is entirely self-validated. To pursue this goal may sometimes mean a total opposition to cultural traditions and practices, and this does not make the feminist agenda any less logical or validated, only less obtainable when working within strictly cultural borders.

In moving on to discuss the cultural relativist impact within the national borders of Iran, a similar trend can be ascertained. Iran, and indeed most Islamic nations in North Africa and Asia maintain some of the most religiously influenced cultural practices in the world. Unlike the United States and India, Iran is a non-secular state, and the nation is officially ruled by the religious texts of the Qur'an, and by those who have the power to interpret its teachings (Frick, 560). It is true that as previously discussed, feminists have been using the religious factions of their culture and identity to improve women's status in society for centuries. It is also true that Iran is one of the most culturally unique and simultaneously dangerous places for social protest in the world (Brems, 150).

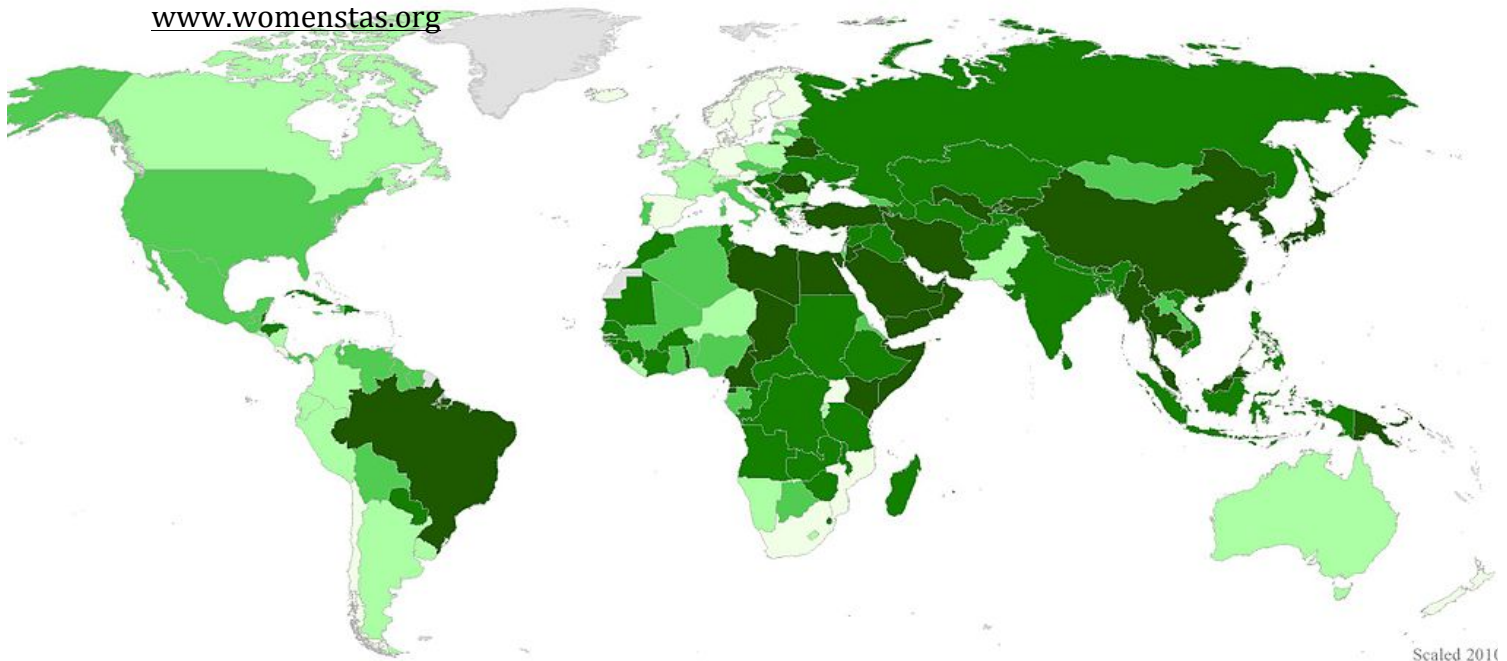
It is worth divulging for a moment to remark on the common understanding that a country's secularity is often associated with liberality and freedom. I have attached below two maps, the first of which portrays global statistics of the secularity of states, and underneath one that denotes statistics relating to the percentage of women participating in national governments. The former map may be indicative of religious or cultural influence in a nation's ruling government, and when compared to the latter a linkage between secularity and women's involvement in government might be implied. What is important to note about these two maps is

that they don't coincide as much as one might assume; the United States and India, both officially secular, have only 20-29% (U.S.) and 10-19% (India) of women involved in the government respectively. On the flip side, Iran and Norway are both countries that have official religious institutions of the State. The implications of these non-secular governments are not as clear-cut as might be expected: Norway has some of the highest statistics of women in government, between 40-50%, converse to Iran, which has between 0-10. And while it is true that Norway's Lutheran Church influence is mild and a less dominate presence than Islam is in Iran, the point remains that sheer "secularity" was not the direct cause for differences in the nations' social institutions. Thus it cannot be argued that simply a non-secular government is responsible for gender inequality, but rather the deeper workings within a culture that are responsible for female suppression.



Governmental Participation by Women

www.womenstas.org



- No Data
- 0-10% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 10-19% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 20-29% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 30-39% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 40-50%+ of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers

It being established that simply being a non-secular state is not sufficient evidence to point the blame of women's inequality towards the religious institutions

of Iran, a more critical analysis of the nation's failure to obtain significant gender equality must be attempted. Iran, as do many other Islamic countries, has a strong history of feminism that goes back centuries (Frick 560). One of the fundamental steps in understanding the Islamic feminist movement, as Aysha Hidayatullah points

out in her article, *Feminist Interpretation of the Qur'an in a Comparative Feminist Setting*, is that the Qur'an as a religious text is no more innately androcentric than most others: namely the Torah, the Bible, or even the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Hidayatullah, 116). Rather, Hidayatullah argues that it is the interpretive reading of these texts that defines their significance and progression to the cultures in which they are prevalent, and this has been done by feminists across every main faith of the world. To discount the Qur'an as having equity-serving value is to discredit a potentially huge strength of the global feminist movement.

That being said, there is no denying the obvious lack of autonomy which has been the inevitable outcome of tying the feminist agenda so stringently to the Islamic culture of Iran. Some feminists (within and outside of Iran) have argued that using any inherently patriarchal doctrine as a leading tool to fight for gender equality is counterproductive and can eventually have no effectiveness, while others maintain that it is the only effective means of producing widely-accepted advancements (Hidayatullah, 116).

In his article, "Gender Difference Masquerading as a Tool for Women Oppression in Cultural Discourse", scholar Wani Lako discusses the impossibility of a mutual preservation and respect for individual cultures and a simultaneous securing of gender equality. Lako asserts, "many cultural and religious norms are contrary to the HRs (human rights) of women, despite the fact that, these religious and cultural norms are claimed to be indispensable to society" (Lako, 4). Lako makes the claim that many "culturally rich" societies were founded on principles, ideologies and social constructions that literally depended on the suppression and

submission of women, and because of this the very core of most cultures is inherently contrasting female empowerment (Lako, 6).

There is no positive correlation between respects for individual cultures and the emergence and sustenance of gender equality. It could be argued that, respect for particular cultures is not the missing link within the framework of the appalling universal subjugation of women of all races, in accordance with the degree of societal development obtaining in respective cultural formations. -Lako, 6

As Lako argues, there can be little correlation between upholding fundamentally patriarchal values and gaining ultimate gender equality, because the preservation of such cultures relies on the continued inequality of women to men. Yes, women in Iran may have recently gained access to better education, healthcare, and divorce rights, and they may find empowerment in the mandated Iranian wardrobe. These advancements are not to be discredited or belittled, but note that they reflect on *improvement* in quality of life for women, not on *equality*. Women in Iran and surrounding countries don't have absolute freedom of choice in matters in which their male counterparts do, and some feminist scholars argue that this connects the equality-seeking woman in Iran more closely to a woman in the UK, a stranger, than it does to her male neighbors, at least in the matter at hand.

The common cultural and sociological chain which links the subjugation of women in the West to that of women in other cultures is the phenomenon of patriarchy, which is universal, regardless of spiritual, temporal and spatial factors obtaining in all human societies globally. -Lako, 9

Lako claims that the fight for gender equality is ultimately one independent of culture. The patriarchal dichotomy is the oldest, largest, and most globally inclusive social structure that can be perceived with a historical lens and across economic and political borders. To try and overcome it using it's own offspring, in this case meaning Iranian practices and Islamic culture, may not be entirely possible (Lako, 10).

While Lako presents a rather extremist vision, his point is logically crafted of the same philosophical reasoning behind cultural relativist theory. If we view culture as (at least in part) “ the aggregate of value systems in human societies; and according to which, many human societies distinguish themselves from others,” a common trend across the board has to be the suppression of the female gender. This commonality across the globe is enough to argue for ties between feminism which transcend cultural boundaries, and while not a call for a Eurocentric universalistic ethical code, it certainly may lead to a definite expiration date of the Qur'an being an ultimate tool of empowerment for the Iranian feminist, not because it is a product of the Islamic faith, but because it is a necessity for the sustainment of the patriarchal system.

In the discussion of cultural relativism as it leads to moral relativism, and the impact this has on women in society, Norway is an interesting example. As previously discussed, Norway has some of the most advanced social equity programs and statistics in the world, and consistently produces data that highlights its citizens as socially justified (Brems, 150). However, we may use Norway to highlight further how cultural relativism results in a lack of multicultural

understanding and furthers internal marginalization of women. Norway, and indeed much of Scandinavia and northern Europe, has an informal “When in Rome, do as the best Romans do” policy. As a member of NATO, the UN, and the EEA, Norway has traditionally aligned itself with other democratic governances. Norway has not been directly involved in warfare as a nation since World War II, and has served as a peace-making diplomat in several instances over the past 70 years (Garton).

We can use Norway’s peaceful involvement in the world as a kind of positive parallel to cultural relativist discourse: the country has a global voice and continues to further its own culture, which happens to be the culture of advancing gender equality, but the country remains relatively quiet in addressing global issues outside its own geographic domain. This has placed Norway in a rather agreeable place with the rest of the world, and has given their voice more authority and weight in matters which they have proven themselves comparatively suitable to speak on.

Part III: Cultural relativism as an indirect proponent of a global hierarchy system, and of a general lack of understanding and unity between national feminist discourses

The third and final chapter of this thesis will discuss the implications cultural relativism has on international relations pertaining to feminist movements. We will

look into how cultural relativism serves as a perpetuator of the global hierarchy system, which has kept more developed western nations on top of the nonwestern world in the political, social, and economic fields. I'll also delve into the ways cultural relativist theory has influenced communications and relationships between feminist circles of the four sample nations, focusing on how it has allowed for a kind of "savior" mentality to take hold in some Western countries. Finally, I'll finish the section by touching on how the implications of cultural relativism have changed specifically within the past several decades in the post-modern and post post-modern era, as globalization has drastically changed the manner in which we understand the world and each other.

On a theoretical level, it has been established that cultural relativism merely implies an inability to understand the intrinsic values and practices of a culture from the outside. We have tracked this line of understanding as it has influenced global issues such as women's inequality, and discussed how the philosophy has given feminists in non-western parts of the world a sense of agency and empowerment, and how it has simultaneously detracted from the feminist agenda's ability to advance itself within cultural boundaries. But the final and (arguably) most important piece to the puzzle of relativist and feminist theory is way the two interact on an international, global scale.

For the sake of economy and space, I will ask the reader to share my understanding that the term "modernity" begins with and refers to the physical, political, and economic colonization of the non-western world by European and later American government. These processes began happening long before the term

'Cultural Relativism' was implemented, and by the time the ideology became widely recognized in the early 20th century, much of the economic and cultural devastation as a result of modernity had already occurred in much of South America, Africa, the Middle-East, and Australia and the Pacific Islands (Frick, 554). Cultural relativist theory was popularized by American philosophers after WWI, when they were recovering from the sting of major loss and wanted isolation from European and global affairs. However, history proves that this remote stance didn't last long for the U.S., and by the time they achieved victory in WWII, the United States was simultaneously embracing a cultural relativist outlook and reaping the benefits of being the most influential and economically powerful nation in the world (Brems).

The underlying connection I'm attempting to make is this: cultural relativism is an incredibly useful and convenient philosophy for a country to adopt when they arise at the top of a new global order. Emerging from a depression and World War victory with a booming economy, considerable political power, and fearsome technological advances, the U.S. was in a well-adjusted position to take hold of practically any ideology they wanted with which to view the outside world (Frick). While making sure they had a say in the national and international affairs of many countries in the Middle East, South America and Asia, U.S. activists and scholars also adopted a "your culture, your business" mentality, and in this way were quite deft at citing the source of non-western nations' economic and political troubles on the quality of their chosen culture rather than on the interference of the United States government (Mele', 684).

To put it another way, the United States and other European scholars drove the popularization of cultural relativist theory at a time when they were already the winners of the global economic game. American scholars promoted the idea of “otherness” being valid unto itself at a time when that otherness was already so conclusively beneath their own standard of governance and quality of life, as to shift any blame of underdevelopment away from corrupt foreign affairs and onto the values of the society itself for being intrinsically inadequate (Mele’, 686).

The reality of why nations like India and Iran are less developed than those such as the United States and Norway is a complicated mixture of historical contexts and international and internal affairs; and this paper is in no way trying to create an oversimplification of such a topic. The simple conveyance, for the purpose of this work, is to point out the convenient historical contexts under which American theorists promoted cultural relativism in a global context, and how the idea of culture as being the sole indicator of a nation’s development status is quite a useful promotion strategy for the (at the time, at least) most powerful nation in the world.

The definition of colonization I wish to invoke here is a predominantly discursive one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women in the Third World through the use of particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject that take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the United States and Western Europe. – Mohanty, 19

All this talk of cultural relativism and colonization of power can of course be focused in to reflect the feminist discourse. Cultural relativism has been used to separate feminist theories as being symbolic of the culture from which they are

derived, which they of course are, to an extent. But it has also served to end the conversation there, to keep it at a national level when the issue of women's rights is really being fought on a global scale. If cultural practices and values can truly be understood only from within, and there is no further need to question or communicate beyond that line of understanding, then the various feminists discourses are left unable to connect on a mutually beneficial level, a level which exists beyond the boundaries of cultural implications. Cultural relativist theory in this way fragments feminist theory.

To further the discussion of the international relationships between feminists discourses as influenced by cultural relativism, I will refer to Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her writing, "Feminism Without Borders: Under Western Eyes", where she discusses the implications of culture and globalization on the relationships between "first" and "third" world feminism (Mohanty, 20). Mohanty argues that cultural relativist thinking has created a rift between cultures so deep that the nonwestern and western parts of the world are no longer able to share understandings even in regards to social causes they share, such as the global feminist agenda for women's equality (Mohanty, 24).

As post-modernism and post post-modernism has shifted the Western world in place of active colonization, a different effect of cultural relativism has taken root. The divide in cultural understanding has prompted a "savior" mentality adopted by the United States and parts of Western Europe, wherein scholars and activists feel a level of responsibility to give agency to nonwestern cultures previously dominated or stripped of resources by the West. A huge influx of academic writings and studies

have been constructed in the past 20 or so years, predominately by American scholars, which outline the values and/or issues surrounding the women's rights activists and feminists discourses in developing countries like India, or socially disadvantageous nations like Iran (Abu-Lughod, 785). The cultural and social issues of the East have been criticized heavily by western nations (an example could be the misguided ban on burqas and niqābs in France in 2010), but so have their solutions (such as the previously discussed American feminist attack on the authenticity of Islamic feminism). This desire of Western academics to be the chief contributors to the solution, to fix the external issues of which (lest we forget) the Western world was a primary source, has caused further tension among global feminist scholars (Abu-Lughod, 782).

On the other hand, it is also possible to discern a trend of western scholars' attempts to defend the culturally implicit methods of obtaining women's equality in non-western countries. These remaining cultural relativists may seem like the better of the two archetypes, however they are guilty of the same "savior" impulse as American critics. These activists inadvertently proclaim the only way discourses such as Islamic feminism, or Indian feminists' forbearing use of CEDAW, can be validated is through Western endorsement; here again is presented a reoccurring need of the West to somehow be an active part in the solution to the social problems they once benefited comfortably from (Abu-Lughod, 782). Thus on top of fighting for gender equality, non-western feminists are also given an addition "Third World difference", which assumes them to be behind the western feminist discourse by mere default.

A comparison between western feminist self-presentation and western feminist representation of women in the Third World yields significant results. Universal images of the Third World woman (the veiled woman, caste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the “Third World difference” to “sexual difference”, are predicated upon assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their lives. This is not to suggest that Western women are secular, liberated, and in control of their own lives. I am referring to discursive self-presentation, not necessarily material reality. If this were material reality, there would be no need for political movements in the west. Similarly, only from the vantage point of the West is it possible to define the Third World as underdeveloped and economically dependent. Without the over-determined discourse that creates the Third World, there would be no (singular and privileged) First World. Without the “Third World woman”, the particular self-presentation of Western women mentioned above would be problematical. I am suggesting then, that one enables and sustains the other. – Mohanty, 42

As Mohanty eloquently states, the self-represented image of the West being the most socially evolved; of their feminist discourse as being the most intrinsically validated and advanced; this line of thinking hinges completely on the simultaneous perception of the nonwestern world being “less-than”, and dependent on Western liberation assistance. Whether this liberation is attempting to criticize nonwestern feminist methods or further them along is nearly irrelevant to the core of its conception.

The fragmentation in different feminist discourses as prompted through the sentiments of cultural relativist theory is not the conclusive cause of such rifts between scholars and activists, but the connection between the two is strong. A philosophy which suggests an inability of understanding, combined with a long

history of colonization, has certainly obscured the lines of communication between Western and Non-Western feminists, delaying a unified front in a global fight.

Conclusion

The reason respect for difference should not be confused with cultural relativism is that it does not preclude asking how we, living in this privileged and powerful part of the world, might examine our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places have found themselves...where we seek to be active in the affairs of distant places, can we do so in the spirit of support for those within those communities whose goals are to make women's (and men's) lives better? Can we use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation? - Abu-Lughod, 789

Cultural relativist theory has had a long and involved influence in the way many philosophers and scholars have understood social issues around the world, especially that of women's equality. The issue of women's rights is one of the farthest-reaching and most encompassing struggles in history, and through countless lenses can an attempt be made for its perception and deconstruction. A theoretical thesis, this paper has served to look into the different implications cultural relativism has had on different cultural feminists discourses, focusing on four different nation-states throughout the globe.

We have looked at the ways cultural relativism has been used by women as an empowerment theology, implemented to defend culturally implicit ways of advancing women's movements. We have also deconstructed the less palpable manners in which cultural relativism has endangered the progression of the feminist agenda, through looking at the point in which cultural values cannot share interest with the feminist discourse. Finally, we have attempted to draw lines between cultural relativism and the international relationships between feminists in the post-modern and present times, viewing the ideology as a proponent of the modern global hierarchy between nations and scholars.

While none of this research is conclusive, it is certainly useful in understanding the evolution of cultural relativism as it has influenced another discipline, one that is continuing to shift its dynamics throughout and beyond cultural borders. Perhaps it is too simple to say that cultural relativism has proved harmful to the global feminist discourse, as it is also too encompassing to argue that cultural relativism can have no service in the structure of furthering women's equality. As with most things, we can find in this research a need for a deeper understanding, one that takes us beyond relativism without forsaking individuality or cultural value. A more inclusive conversation regarding feminist discourses can be sought after; formulating a goal that seeks global responsibility and cross-cultural respect in the pursuit of a more complete understanding of the feminist identity.

Ideologies have sprung up all over the world for thousands of years, in order to help us better understand the world and its diverse occupants. It is important to link these ideologies to the time and place from which they derived, in order to clearly see the potentials they have in shaping and grouping the world's peoples. It is also important to trace social theories, to understand where they came from and for what purpose. Often, it feels natural to accept them as abstract entities with no connections to the physical world; a tool to be used in conversation when we're discussing something else. But I have found through my research it is worthwhile to deconstruct social theories, because they carry implications both far-reaching and deep rooted.

Suppressed groups have often used existing social constructs to further their cause, even when those constructs seem impossibly opposed to the empowerment for which they fight. The case of cultural relativism is no different. It is a theory which was not brought about with any intention of giving agency to women in any part of the world, and yet, its popularity has driven feminist groups to take on its logic in such a way that can support the agenda for women's equality. What I've outlined doesn't undermine the success or the significance of that accomplishment. Merely, it illustrates that women have bent cultural relativist theory in their favor as far as it can be bent. It will be impossible to achieve complete gender equality if feminists rely on a philosophy that first and foremost serves to validate the androcentric models every existing culture has been founded upon.

Rather, I propose a new cultural theory to be in order for the feminist embrace, one that can combine a multi-faceted identity with a united global front for gender equality. Perhaps if the feminist discourses themselves were treated with readier validation of their own accord, instead of being attached so closely to an ideology which validates instead the cultures from which they are derived, there would be a less tense and more sustainable flow of the values, understandings, and end-goals that make up the global feminist discourse. If culture was in the backseat, rather than behind the wheel of how we understand the feminist drive, it may be easier to understand and appreciate the different vantage points from which female empowerment can be fought and perceived. It is after all, a struggle that affects everyone, both men and women, around the world. Perhaps it is time for the

feminist agenda to stand on its own, compatible not primarily with the patriarchal systems of a place, but with the many different working versions of itself.

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