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**The Postcolonial Feminist as
Conductor/Reader of Interviews with
Women in Conflict Situations**

Lubna N. Chaudhry

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The Postcolonial Feminist as Conductor/Reader of Interviews with Women in Conflict Situations

Lubna N. Chaudhry

One writes in order to deflect death and the specters that haunt us; but what one writes can be historically useful only when in some way it coincides with the need of the collectivity to achieve its identity. This, I think, is what one wants. In saying: "This is who I am," in revealing oneself, the writer can help others to become aware of who they are. As a means of revealing collective identity, art should be considered an article of prime necessity, not a luxury.

(Galeano, 1983/2000, p.171)

Abstract

The paper raises key questions with respect to the role of postcolonial feminists researching women in conflict situations. The examination derives primarily from the author's experience with data collection and analysis in the context of the post-violence scenario in Karachi. Highlighting the politics of knowing and being known, the paper points out the implications of these politics for the agendas of those researchers, feminist and otherwise, who are seeking to end systems of domination. The author is especially concerned with how the tensions between feminist aspirations and the requirements of academic rigor circumscribed, impacted, and limited the knowledge production exercise. The paper concludes with a few thoughts on the power relations framing the dissemination and application of the knowledge produced through research processes.

The collective identity that this paper will attempt to reveal, scrutinize, and problematize is that of postcolonial feminists researching women in conflict situations. I choose the identity label "postcolonial feminist" not just to indicate geographical location in contexts that for some are problematically dubbed as postcolonial (see, e.g., Shohat, 1996). Punter (2000) uses the word "postcolonial" to refer to the world as it has been since the beginning of colonization, rather than to connote a world after the end of colonialism. In the same vein, I use the phrase "postcolonial feminist" in order to highlight the striving towards a future where imperialism and neo-colonialism will not exist, where decolonization would actually entail the eradication of unequal power relations at all different levels. Deploying the identity "feminist" conveys a commitment to placing women at the center of analysis, but I adhere to the brand of feminism that emphasizes the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, class, and other factors in determining the experiences and life courses of specific women.

Even as I grapple with my positionality as a researcher in order to raise questions that I hope are of fundamental interest to all of us, I also want to put forth the notion of research "as a prime article of necessity, not a luxury." Of course, the research I am referring to, is a particular kind of research, feminist if we so please to name it, and what this feminist research is, in theory and in practice, is still under debate in feminist quarters and elsewhere. Not all research is necessary, and there is actually a lot that is rotten to the core, useless, toxic, and, therefore, highly dispensable, if the systems of domination

structuring the production of knowledge would allow us to throw it out. The research I deem necessary challenges systems of domination in various contexts, including those of the knowledge industry itself, and this challenge is manifested in the content, process, dissemination, and application of that research.

To “represent reality while accusing it,” is what Marcuse (1978, p.7) saw as the essence of subversive art, an essence only revealed when form and content became one in the aesthetic dimension. At the risk of offending those who might be getting quite irritated with my irreverent interchange between art and research, I believe with other critical and feminist researchers that, “the truth of art (and research) lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality, i.e., of those who established it, to define what is real” (Marcuse, 1978, p.9).

For postcolonial feminists, research, the process of getting to know, becomes a project of uncovering meanings hitherto suppressed, restricted, or obscured by institutions of power. The intent through research, including research in conflict zones, is to display how the workings of multi-layered power relations restrict alternative meanings that conceal the deeper level of social life, thus creating misunderstanding, thwarting action, and promoting conflict (Thomas, 1993). Since feminist researchers have tended to agree with Lorde (1984) that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” key to this unmasking of hidden, multiple meanings is the process of inquiry, the methodologies employed and the epistemological underpinnings of those methodologies. Feminist researchers, in addition to being preoccupied with the most efficacious ways of arriving at their “data,” are concerned that the process of their research, the data collection as well as the data analysis and writing up, does not perpetuate inequity and injustice (see Oakley, 2000 for detailed account). The transformative potential of feminist research then lies not only in the content of the knowledge produced and the use to which that knowledge is put, but also in the manner in which the research is conducted and reported.

My objective in the space of this paper is to explore, from within the context of my experiences as a researcher in a project investigating women’s experiences of insecurity, what it means to try to do research differently, as a postcolonial feminist “studying” women in conflict situations. Although the project had two components focusing on women’s voices within the Karachi conflict as well as the Afghan refugee context, I only conducted interviews with women in Karachi and also chose to focus on the data from that conflict in my writing¹. This paper then explores issues raised by the Karachi context².

I write here in the tradition of self-reflexivity, a critical scrutiny of one’s self as the researcher, put forth by feminist writers (e.g., Lather, 1991; Trinh, 1989) and applied by numerous feminist researchers in their writing (e.g., Beoku-Betts, 1994; Cotteril, 1992; Behar, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994). Circumscribed by a set of principles and precepts vis-à-vis feminism and sisterhood, research and epistemology, advocacy and social transformation, some of them determined by project imperatives, others driven by individual

1 I chose to focus on the Karachi context, because I knew that most of the women we interviewed would speak Urdu, a language I can speak, read, and write quite fluently. (We opted to place women identified as Urdu-speaking or Mohajir, at the center of our analysis, because of their continuous exposure to the changing configurations of the violence in Karachi.) When the project started I felt that since I did not know Pashto, Persian, Durree or any of the languages spoken by the Afghan refugee women, I should not conduct interviews. I also had biases against writing papers based on translated material. I have since then become cognizant of the trade-offs of such an approach. One does indeed lose out if interviews are conducted through a translator, and if writing or analysis is based on translated material. However, restricting the impulse to know and write if one does not have the talent or time to learn new languages might not always be a viable option.

2 See Khattak (2002) for a concise, yet thorough history of the Karachi conflict and its antecedents. The research focused primarily on women impacted by the ethnic violence that was generated after April 1985 and has persisted in various forms to this date, but also encompasses the later sectarian killings that were an off-shoot of the ethnic violence.

beliefs, I entered the field to conduct interviews. Later I sat in my study to read transcripts and listen to tapes of interviews facilitated by others and myself. Instead of erasing myself as a researcher, as mainstream, “objective” research would have us do, I assume myself to be a social subject in relation with others, whose specificity profoundly shapes the process and product of inquiry, and who is in turn shaped by what transpires.

Research, from such a perspective, becomes a matter of dialectics, whereby knowledge is generated through a series of relationships, between the researcher and the researched, between the researcher and the voices on the tapes, between the researcher and the texts of the interviews. How was this knowledge that I helped generate constrained and enabled by the kind of relationships I managed to forge and nurture at different times and in different spaces, with voices present and absent, as a postcolonial feminist and as a researcher? In addition to the power dynamics generally framing relationships, the interview process is a hierarchical field of force. According to Crapanzano (1984), this field is structured around the interplay of demand and desire, the demand that the interviewee expose herself, and the desire to know on the part of the interviewer. The extent to which I relied on the power hierarchies in my role as researcher, feminist and otherwise, was brought home to me when my recording equipment broke down just right after I arrived at a research participant’s home for an interview. I felt very vulnerable as I struggled with all the different kind of wires in front of me, right there in front of the household whose daughter I was supposed to interview. Yes, I felt accountable to the collectivity governing the research process – we had indeed decided to tape-record interviews for a reliable archive – but my discomfort was also born out of a sense of appearing incompetent in the eyes of those who were trusting me with their life stories. For some reason, I wanted to seem invincible to these people.

This paper is based on a presentation I made at the workshop signifying the end of our project. For my presentation I prepared a bunch of notes and reflections that I hoped would somehow coalesce into at least an essay, with some semblance of logical, organized thought. Initially, I had planned a highly systematic presentation of my ideas, where I would enthrall my audience with the splendor of my formalistic argumentation. The outline that I consigned to the recycling bin had three sub-headings: the post-colonial feminist as interviewer, the post-colonial feminist as reader of interviews, and the postcolonial feminist researcher’s responsibility in conflict situations. I had also structured a highly elaborate scheme whereby my problematicization of the identity “post-colonial feminist” would be woven most effectively into the introduction, the three sections, and the conclusion.

I retain the non-linear format of my presentation, to the extent that it is possible, within this paper, including my exploration of why I ended up with the non-linear presentation. Here I introduce some points with respect to the politics of knowing and being known, and the implications of these politics for our agendas as those seeking the end of systems of domination. I am especially concerned with how the tensions between our feminist aspirations and the requirements of academic rigor circumscribed, impacted, and, in some cases, limited the knowledge production exercise. I also attempt to draw attention to the particular nuances of research interactions in conflict situations.

What led to the implosion of the linear narrative from within myself into the innumerable fragments that I then tried to salvage for my presentation, and subsequently this paper? It could be that my unitary subjectivity as the researcher fixating herself with her own gaze was decentered by the schizophrenic existence I was leading in the week before my presentation. I was stealing moments to jot down bits for the “pocofem” presentation as I interviewed candidates for a Research Assistant position, who could only define community in terms of shared poverty and intervention strategies; argued with fellow researchers who insisted that focus groups should lead to consensus, norms, and closure; and reconnected with friends

and relatives after a two week visit to the United States, who for the most part, wanted to discuss when I would live with my husband and have children. All I know is that somewhere along the way as I was trying to suppress signs of a growing chest infection with massive doses of Vitamin C, I found myself quoting Barthes (1975), "I remove myself from Narrative" (p.18). For Barthes, it is love as a synchronic process of drifting and not choosing that allows for the rupturing of the everyday self, thus opening up spaces for alternative subjectivities. It was perhaps my eventual acceptance of the inherently polyphonic nature of my identity as the postcolonial feminist that motivated me to substitute the structured format prescribed in academic circles for a relatively informal conversational presentation.

How can I represent my postcolonial feminist self – or should I say selves – except through a gathering and a re-using of bits, pieces, and fragments from here and there, since this self, these selves, whatever, enacts itself, themselves, in bits, pieces, and fragments? The need to acknowledge the pluralism and heterogeneity underlying my identity as postcolonial feminist is not born out of a postmodern existential angst or nostalgia for the fixed modern self. Rather the assertion of this multi-faceted identity is a political act. It is driven by the realization that the rupturing of my self and my resistance to that rupturing is located within the historical and cultural reality defined by colonial and neo-colonial legacies of violence, as well as more localized power configurations of gender, ethnicity and class. These local power relations are reformulated and reinscribed through intersections with global level discourses of domination. It is also through an embracing of the multiplicity of my subjectivities that I open up the possibilities of coalitions and alliances with those whose lives and experiences might not resonate with the monolithic, primarily academic identity of the postcolonial feminist researcher.

So who is this postcolonial feminist who interviews, reads interviews, tries to figure out her responsibility to the women in conflict situations, and who is now the author of this paper? "We are not the woman question asked by somebody else; we are the women who ask the questions," writes Rich (2001), as she attempts to understand the politics of her location as a white, Jewish feminist living in the First World center of imperialism. Yes, I am the woman who is privileged enough to ask the questions, but I never quite feel I am not the woman question asked by somebody else. My very presence in a Third World country, my non-white skin seems to give others in the geographical First World and the First World spaces within the Third World the license to vouch for my oppression, to appropriate my "research findings" as exotic. And yet again, I do not feel ready to be left out of the woman question, even if I would like to be included in the process of asking the questions. The researcher Lubna is forever accompanied by her shadow, a Lubna all the more powerful in her absence, the obedient daughter, the dutiful daughter-in-law, the loving sister, the supportive wife, the nurturing mother. Then, there is of course, the everyday reality of struggling as a researcher, both female and feminist, in a male-dominated world.

However, there is always the danger that in claiming discrimination or oppression as a woman, I will succumb to the universalizing tendencies in feminist discourses that valorize the common suffering of all sisters. How do I restrain myself from co-opting the suffering and trauma of the women whose lives I am investigating in the guise of identifying with their plight and wanting to do something about it? How do I continually remain cognizant of my position of power in the field and at my desk, since "power," as Punter (2000) reminds us, "is a process of writing, of inscription" (p.17)? Is it even possible to be critically analytical in the research process, without being pulled into the discourses of relentless objectivity and neutral distance feminist epistemologies have attempted to reject? For LaCapra (2001) a necessary component in the study of traumatic events is what he calls "empathic unsettlement" (p.41). This means being responsive to the traumatic experience of others in a manner that is not "one-dimensionally objectifying or narrowly cognitive" (p.42) Affect becomes central to the task of recording

history, and trying to deny emotions evoked by trauma becomes an act of evading and distorting the knowledge produced. The challenge is to work through this secondary experience of trauma in an ethically and cognitively responsible way, without usurping the identity of the person for whom the trauma was a primary experience.

For the postcolonial feminist researcher who shares a structural history of colonialism and neo-colonialism with her research participants, if not the consequences of the specific events and conflicts under scrutiny, this task of striking the balance between disidentification and empathy becomes particularly painstaking. Yet the urgency of striking this balance and reflecting this balance to those around me in the field became particularly salient when a “go-between” with the community who was helping to arrange interviews with participants quit his job to devote himself full-time to the cause of advancing peace and justice. Evidently, he had been inspired by our research team. My enthusiastic involvement with my research participants’ lives and experiences, my rage at wanting desperately to do something about it, my melancholy after I left those whose sons, husbands, and brothers had been brutally killed-- all of this was real. Traces of these persisted in my dream states and conversations even months after my departure from the research site, but the point is, I did leave, go to another realm where the demands of the everyday were different. Yet, I had somehow miscommunicated a level of intensity in my commitment to the issues I was investigating to those around me. It took me some time to realize that the space for the articulation and working out of my secondary trauma were my field-notes, not my conversations with the survivors of violence. My empathic responses did not always call for vigorous expression or immediate action. As I attempted to glean life stories out of narratives of chaos, sometimes all I could do was just listen and honor people’s words.

Another hazard of overzealous identification with research participants, as women, as fellow sufferers, as potential peace activists, was revealed in my tendency to constantly evaluate my research participant’s words, actions, and interactions in the light of what perceived as my feminist ethos. Our project was motivated by feminist standpoint epistemologies, whereby situated knowledge produced from particular perspectives was to be interpreted within feminist frameworks, as devised and articulated by the researchers, thus dissolving the objective-subjective dichotomy (see Harding, 1996, for account of standpoint epistemologies.) I caught myself imposing a narrow feminist analysis not only when I was reading/coding interviews, but also during interview interactions.

In focusing too much on how the research participants were caught up in patriarchal masculinist discourses I faced the possibility of losing out on a more nuanced interpretation of texts and interactions, whereby adherence to other discourses was undermining the dominant text. Yes, indeed the hold of patriarchal discourses was strong, for the research participants were never out of it. However, the relationship with these discourses was not that of unproblematic conformity. This was more obvious in the interview situations where I stayed to chat after putting away the microphone. I was of course delighted whenever I came across deviance, creativity, and resistance, but I also learned that even where I can not find common feminist ground, as defined by myself, I needed to let go of preconceived notions if I did not want to turn into a fascist. I had to remind myself of my own complicity with systems of power and domination, and here my years of learning to negotiate relationships with my female cousins came in handy. Despite having chosen to lead a life very different from them, I have never left them behind. Their judgments of my life upset me. I get frustrated with my own inability to stop wanting to change their lives for the better. But we manage to find time together once in a few months where we suspend our judgments, paint our toe-nails, and talk on subjects ranging from the latest family scandal to global warming. The postcolonial feminist researcher then can not stand on her own. She needs Lubna, the *parhakoo* Baji, who can be generous and funny at times, to help her out.

If “the making new of all relationships” is the goal of feminist struggle, as Rich (2001) puts it, then as feminist researchers we can not afford the chance to miss even one opportunity of trying to forge a different kind of relationship. What better place to start than with the women whose words gives us our voices in our papers, at workshops, and at international conferences? I have never been able to agree with Spivak (1988) that the subaltern can not speak. No one probably bothered to hear her. A critical feminist goal is to remove the structural barriers that prevent women from being heard. Nevertheless, those of us who carry women’s words across time and space, even if this transportation is mediated by our subjectivities, need to figure out how to do so without further disempowering our research participants through the reinscription of stereotypes and monolithic constructions that mask the heterogeneous nature of power relations. Following Foucault (1983), we need to refuse what we are, and this includes, at times a refusal of our feminist selves, and realizing that these selves are also crafted through discourses emanating from certain centers of power. As citizen-subjects surrounded and trapped in our own histories of domination, fear, hatred, pain, and hierarchy, we need to become aware of our love for power, our desire for the very thing we want to take on. Trying to build alliances and coalitions across differences and on someone else’s terms is threatening to say the least. “Class instinct,” as Althusser (1971, p. 130) points out, “is subjective and spontaneous,” but it is only through a reworking and reformulation of this instinct that we can hope to build social movements with purpose.

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