



UNDOING THE “PACKAGE PICTURE” OF CULTURES*

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Many feminists of color have demonstrated the need to take into account differences among women to avoid hegemonic gender-essentialist analyses that represent the problems and interests of privileged women as paradigmatic. As feminist agendas become global, there is growing feminist concern to consider national and cultural differences among women. However, in attempting to take seriously these cultural differences, many feminists risk replacing gender-essentialist analyses with culturally essentialist analyses that replicate problematic colonialist notions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “non-Western cultures” and the women who inhabit them (Narayan 1998). Seemingly universal essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by culture-specific essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as “Western culture,” “non-Western cultures,” “Indian women,” and “Muslim women.” The picture of the “cultures” attributed to these groups of women remains fundamentally essentialist, depicting as homogeneous groups of heterogeneous peoples whose values, ways of life, and political commitments are internally divergent.

I believe that many contemporary feminists are attuned to the problem of imposing Sameness on Other women but fail to register that certain scripts of Difference can be no less problematic. Cultural imperialism in colonial times denied rather than affirmed that one’s Others were “just like oneself,” insisting on the colonized Others’ difference from and inferiority to the Western subject. Insistence on sharp contrasts between “Western culture” and “Other cultures” and on the superiority of Western culture functioned as justifications for colonialism. However, this self-portrait of Western culture had only a faint resemblance to the political and cultural va-

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lues that actually pervaded life in Western societies. Thus, liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic Western values at the very moment when Western nations were engaged in slavery, colonization, and the denial of liberty and equality to large segments of Western subjects, including women.

Anticolonial nationalist movements added to the perpetuation of essentialist notions of national culture by embracing, and trying to revalue, the imputed facets of their own culture embedded in the colonialists' stereotypes. Thus, while the British imputed "spiritualism" to Indian culture to suggest lack of readiness for the worldly project of self-rule, many Indian nationalists embraced this definition to make the anticolonialist and nationalist argument that their culture was distinctive from and superior to that of the West. Thus, sharply contrasting pictures of Western culture and of various colonized national cultures came to be reiterated by both colonizers and colonized.

Prevalent essentialist modes of thinking about cultures depend on a problematic picture of what various cultures are like, or on what I call the "Package Picture of Cultures." This view understands cultures on the model of neatly wrapped packages, sealed off from each other, possessing sharply defined edges or contours, and having distinctive contents that differ from those of other "cultural packages." I believe that these packages are more badly wrapped and their contents more jumbled than is often assumed and that there is a variety of political agendas that determine who and what are assigned places inside and outside a particular cultural package.

The essentialist Package Picture of Cultures represents cultures as if they were entities that exist neatly distinct and separate in the world, independent of our projects of distinguishing among them, obscuring the reality that boundaries between them are human constructs, underdetermined by existing variations in worldviews and ways of life. It eclipses the reality that the labels currently used to demarcate particular cultures themselves have a historical provenance and that what they individuate as one culture often changes over time. For example, while a prevailing picture of Western culture has its beginning in ancient Greece and perhaps culminating in the contemporary United States, a historical perspective would register that the ancient Greeks did not define themselves as part of



“Western culture” and that “American culture” was initially distinguished from “European culture” rather than assimilated to it under the rubric “Western culture.” The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the use of the term Western to refer to Europe in distinction to “Eastern” or “Oriental” began around 1600, testimony to its colonial origins. Similarly, “Indian culture” is a label connected to the historical unification of an assortment of political territories into “British India,” a term that enabled the nationalist challenge to colonialism to emerge as “Indian.” Labels that pick out particular cultures are not simple descriptions that single out already distinct entities; rather, they are arbitrary and shifting designations connected to political projects that, for different reasons, insist on the distinctness of one culture from another.

The Package Picture of Cultures also assumes that the assignment of individuals to specific cultures is an obvious and uncontroversial matter. Under the influence of this picture, many of us assume that we know as a simple matter of fact to what “culture” we and others belong. I invite readers who think that they are members of Western culture or American culture to ask themselves what they have in common with the millions of people who would be assigned to the same cultural package. Do I share a common culture with every other Indian woman, and, if so, what are the constituent elements that make us members of the same culture? What is my relationship to Western culture? Critical reflection on such questions suggests that the assignment of individuals to particular cultures is more complicated than assumed and that it is affected by numerous, often incompatible, political projects of cultural classification.

The Package Picture of Cultures mistakenly sees the centrality of particular values, traditions, or practices to any particular culture as a given and thus eclipses the historical and political processes by which particular values or practices have come to be deemed central components of a particular culture. It also obscures how projects of cultural preservation themselves change over time. Dominant members of a culture often willingly discard what were previously regarded as important cultural practices but resist and protest other cultural changes, often those pertaining to the welfare of women. For instance, Olayinka Koso-Thomas’s work reveals that in Sierra Leone virtually all the elaborate initiation rites and training that



were traditional preliminaries to female circumcision have been given up because people no longer have the time, money, or social infrastructure for them. However, the rite of excision, abstracted from the whole context of practices in which it used to be embedded, is still seen as a crucial component of “preserving tradition” (Koso-Thomas, O., *The Circumcision of Women*, 1987, p. 23). Feminists need to be alert to such synecdochic moves, whereby parts of a practice come to stand in for the whole, because such substitutions conceal important dimensions of social change.

Feminist engagement with cultural practices should be attentive to a process that I call “selective labeling,” whereby those with social power conveniently designate certain changes in values and practices as consonant with cultural preservation and others as cultural loss or betrayal. Selective labeling allows changes approved by socially dominant groups to appear consonant with the preservation of essential values or core practices of a culture, while depicting changes that challenge the status quo as threats to that culture. The package picture of cultures poses serious problems for feminist agendas in third-world contexts, since it often depicts culturally dominant norms of femininity, along with practices that adversely affect women, as central components of cultural identity and casts feminist challenges to norms and practices affecting women as cultural betrayals (Narayan, U. *Dislocating Culture*, 1997).

Giving up the Package Picture’s view of cultural contexts as homogeneous helps us see that sharp differences in values often exist among those described as members of the same culture while among those described as “members of different cultures” there are often strong affinities in values, opening up liberating possibilities with respect to cross-cultural feminist judgments. For instance, the values and judgments of a Western feminist may diverge greatly from those of politically conservative members of her “package” while they might converge quite strongly with those of an Indian feminist counterpart. A Western feminist accused of imposing Western values in her negative judgment of an Indian cultural practice could, for instance, point out that her judgments correspond closely to those of some Indian feminists. Making this assertion does require her to be informed about Indian feminists’ analyses of the practice and to use her critical judgment when such analyses disagree, as sometimes happens. Feminists can avoid the Package Pictu-



re of Cultures by attending to the historical variations and ongoing changes in cultural practices, to the wide range of attitudes toward those practices manifested by different members of a culture, and to the political negotiations that help to change the meanings and significances of these practices. Such attention would facilitate informed and astute feminist engagement with women's issues in national contexts different from their own.

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