

WOMEN, (UNDER)DEVELOPMENT, EMPIRE: THE OTHER(ED)  
MARGINS IN AMERICAN STUDIES

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

PH.D. IN AMERICAN STUDIES

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
Program in American Studies

May 2010

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The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of MELISSA LEE HUSSAIN find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Remember that you are all people and that all people  
are you.

Remember you are this universe and that this  
universe is you.

Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember language comes from this.

Remember the dance that language is, that life is.

Remember

to remember.

—Joy Harjo, “Remember”

I would like to thank my committee for their encouragement and guidance throughout my stay at Washington State University, and through the chaos of living in five states and two countries while working on my dissertation. They have all helped me grow so much—not just as a scholar, but also as a human being. Victor Villanueva has been not only a real friend to me through many of life’s challenges, but has also been instrumental in shaping my understanding of political economy on a global—rather world-systems—scale and how it speaks to ideology and the rhetorics of racism and imperialism. Victor’s course on contemporary rhetoric was exceptional not only because of the rigorous theoretical lens through which he taught the course, but because he also managed to get a bunch of grumpy, sleep-deprived graduate students excited about learning and laughing (and even dancing!) at 9:00 in the morning. If I could think of one excuse not to finish graduate school, it would be so that I could keep taking his courses indefinitely.

Joan Burbick’s guidance has been fundamental as well, particularly in terms of shaping my thinking about feminist theory and nationalism. Early on in my graduate work, I had the

privilege and pleasure of working with her as my teaching mentor in her course on women writers in the West. I also learned a great deal from her about the interconnections between literature and social, political, and economic forces in her graduate course on backgrounds of American literature. And I am grateful to her for providing support when it was sorely needed: she accompanied my husband and I to the local office of the Department of Homeland Security, when my husband was subject to a rather terrifying post-9/11 “interview” (racial profiling) process.

T.V. Reed’s outstanding graduate seminar on the theory and methods of American Studies was instrumental in my development as a scholar, not only for the wide-ranging theoretical grounding his course provided, but also for how he tied theory to practice in significant ways. And his friendship is a unique one—he has been (simultaneously) my teacher, advisor, program chair, and the minister for my wedding. Without his support, both my life and scholarship would have suffered a great deal.

Pavithra Narayanan was a welcome addition to my committee just at a time when I was in desperate need of some guidance in terms of thinking about South Asian feminism and the specifics of Bangladesh as a site of study, and in terms of applying the tools of political economy to postcolonial studies. She has been a source of real encouragement and support.

There are many others at Washington State University to whom I am deeply grateful. Nelly Zamora—the graduate secretary for most of my stay at WSU—not only made sure my paperwork was in order, but made sure I had enough to eat. She is one of the kindest people I have ever met. And Jean Wiegand—the academic coordinator for American Studies through the majority of my Ph.D program—was extremely helpful to me, particularly given the fact that she

helped me sort out paperwork and deadlines from a distance. Shelli Fowler, who was the director of composition while I was a Teaching Assistant, was an excellent mentor in critical and transformative pedagogy. And I am deeply indebted to a number of other professors at WSU for their influence on both my scholarship and teaching: Marian Sciachitano, Nada Elia, Linda Heidenreich, and Noël Sturgeon in Women's Studies; Alex Hammond, Elizabeth Siler, Carol Siegel, Virginia Hyde, and Camille Roman in English; John Streamas, David Leonard, Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, José Alamillo, and Richard King in Comparative Ethnic Studies. Carol Villanueva was a critical teacher for me in Pullman—I learned much from her about the police state, political economy and world-systems theory.

Fellow graduate students have been some of my best teachers, and the most substantial portion of my learning took place in late-night conversations with them about theory and politics. So thanks go to Susan McDowall, Matt McDowall, James Neiworth, Siskanna Naynaha, Wendy Olson, Serena Villanueva-Tarr, Sky Wilson, Kelvin Monroe, Jeanette Garceau, Tony Zaragoza, Jesús Estrada, Christina Vala, Jody Pepion, David Warner, Winona Beck, Ayano Gizona, Marta Maldonado, José Anazagasty, Lisa Williams, and a number of others.

During my stay in Bangladesh from 2006 to 2008 and in ongoing subsequent conversations, I learned a great deal from so many Bangladeshi scholars and activists. Thanks go to Khaliquzzaman Elias for giving me the opportunity to teach English at North South University and thus the chance to interact with a number of excellent faculty members and students in the Department of English. Anu Muhammad of the Department of Economics at Jahningarnar University and Ahmed Kamal of the Department of History at Dhaka University have not only been significant resources for me theoretically and have pointed me towards other critical

scholars and activists, but they have also been dear friends. Members of the grassroots feminist organization Narripokkho—particularly Shireen Huq and Firdous Azim—not only allowed me to interview them, but they were extremely hospitable and supportive to me, and provided me with a number of resources critical to my research. And Farida Akhter—a feminist activist who co-founded, with other women, the policy research organization UBINIG<sup>1</sup>—has been of great assistance to me through interviews and ongoing conversations. I also thank the Bengali feminist creative writer Selina Hossain for her interview, and Azfar Hussain for translating it. Some Bengali feminist scholars located in the U.S. and England have also been extremely helpful to me—I thank Lamia Karim, Elora Shehabuddin, Naila Kabeer and Elora Chowdhury for various brief encounters, and for speaking with me about feminist politics in Bangladesh, and the role they play as Bengali feminists located in the West.

I owe special thanks to a number of committed left activists in Bangladesh, particularly Zonayed Saki and Taslima Akhter, who have taught me much about activist politics in one of the poorest countries of the world, and who have taken along with them to marches, rallies, demonstrations, meetings, lectures, and a variety of other events, and even guided me through the maze-like streets of Dhaka by rickshaw on so many occasions, to help me hunt down resources and materials. I also had the privilege of working with the Marxist-feminist organization Biplobi Nari Songhoti, and even published an essay in their journal, *Muktashwar*, thanks to the translation into Bangla by Taslima Akhter. I thank, therefore, Taslima Tahreen, Farzana Bobby, Israt Poppy, Monalisa Rahman, Nasrin Siraj, Nusrat Sehab, Champu Ju, Rumana Koli, Lisa Aarzoomand, Shamuli, and Rebeka Nila—among others—for their patience with me and my broken Bangla, and for their tremendous hospitality. I also want to thank Abul Hassan

Rubel and Taslima Tahreen for showing me their school for poor children in Dhaka, called *Amader Pathshala* [Our School], a school that is radically different from the run-of-the mill NGO-run schools for poor children in that *Amader Pathshala* follows a Freirean pedagogy. And for the various ways they taught me about activist politics in Bangladesh, I also want to thank Nurul Kabir, Piash Karim, Arup Rahee, Faruk Wasif, Moshahida Sultana, and Zahid Akter.

I also want to thank Rosemary Hennessy, S. Charusheela, Colette Morrow, and Carol Mason, feminist scholars with whom I have crossed paths along the way, and who have enriched my work in a number of ways. Thanks go to Susan McDowall, Siskanna Naynaha, James Neiworth, Rachel Peterson, Joel Wendland, Christine Drewel, Archana Sharma, Perin Gurel, Mike Lupro, Piash Karim, Matt Barbee, Anu Muhammad, and Lamia Karim for looking at drafts of my work along the way, and for offering critical feedback.

I would also like to thank my mother and father for believing in me, for their love and support, and for journeying halfway across the planet to visit me while I lived in Bangladesh, and for taking care of Salma at critical points along the way, so that I could get my work done. I thank Ken, Wes and Elaine for their love and support offered in so many ways throughout the years, and to Maranda and Hnin Oo Wai for their special friendship. Thanks to my nephews: to Kieran, for teaching me how to look for fairies, and to Tristan, for sharing with me the most infectious laughter. And to all my family in Bangladesh: Amma, Abba, Dipu, Urmi, Audrey, Jasra, Rosy, Shafique, Akash, Rumi, Pintu, Purnata, Bokul khala, Sobhan mama, Rekha khala, Lutu khalu, Tuku mama, Megna mami, Abantee, and Rupunty, thank you for welcoming this *Bideshi* so readily into your family and opening your hearts to me: *ami tomader khub*



*bhalobashi*. Mukta, Rafiq, Dilara, Rashida, and Johnny: you have been some of my greatest teachers in Bangladesh, and I am so grateful to you.

And Azfar, thank you for your loving affection, intellectual stimulation and encouragement, and for the numerous times you found creative ways to entertain Salma so I could work. Thank you for standing by me through the hardest of my times, and believing in my project at a time when I was tearing my hair out, convinced it could not be done, for being patient with me, when I was sleep-deprived and grumpy. Thank you, Salma, for being a constant source of joy and laughter in my life and for making the most ordinary day magical. Thank you for turning the most ordinary moments into poetry—for telling me on the phone the other day, “mama, I’m looking at you with my ears!” And thank you for helping me stay grounded: it’s hard to take myself too seriously when you ask me to stop “computering” so we can play dress-up. Okay, we can play now.

WOMEN, (UNDER)DEVELOPMENT, EMPIRE: THE OTHER(ED)

MARGINS IN AMERICAN STUDIES

ABSTRACT

by Melissa Lee Hussain, Ph.D.  
Washington State University  
May 2010

Chair: Victor Villanueva

An endeavor that traverses the interdisciplinary areas of American studies, rhetorical theory, women's studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, and literary studies, this project emerged from two basic questions: 1) What does it mean to do American Studies, if U.S. imperialism is taken into account? 2) In this era of globalization, what does a country like Bangladesh—one of the poorest countries on this planet, which relies heavily on aid from the World Bank, the IMF, and western donors—have to do with U.S. imperialism? The fundamental argument of this study is that if one inserts the tools of feminist political economy and rhetorical critique into certain methodologies of American Studies and also internationalizes American Studies to account for U.S. imperialism, Bangladesh—described as the “periphery of the periphery”—provides a crucial and challenging site of both theoretical and political interventions. Taking into account the many possible pitfalls for a project that “internationalizes” American Studies—one that could very well reproduce imperialism—this study asks what links can be found between such macro-structures of power-relations as U.S. imperialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy if we examine, for instance, the eugenicist-racist “family planning” programs of USAID in Bangladesh or the country reports produced by the World Bank. However, this study does not simply fix and

freeze a Third World site such as Bangladesh as an object of oppression and domination, but highlights active resistances to U.S. imperialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy emanating from Bangladesh in various forms, including cultural productions, feminist activist work, and mass movements. Also, a fundamental question of this study is how academic work can be pressed into the service of social change.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....   | iii  |
| ABSTRACT.....   | ix   |
| LIST OF FIGURES AND DIAGRAMS.....   | xiii |
| CHAPTER   |      |
| 1. KNOWLEDGE THROUGH WESTERN EYES:<br>MOVING CLOSER TO MY OWN TRUTH AND DREAD.....  | 1    |
| 2. THEORY AND METHOD, PART I: INTERNATIONALIZING<br>AND STRETCHING THE TERRAIN OF AMERICAN STUDIES.....   | 35   |
| 3. THEORY AND METHOD, PART II: FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY<br>AND RHETORICAL CRITIQUE AS INROADS TO AMERICAN STUDIES.....                              | 68   |
| 4. AGAINST SILENCING THE SITES AND SUBJECTS OF<br>SILENCES: THE CASE OF BANGLADESH.....   | 99   |
| 5. THE INTEGRATION OF BANGLADESH INTO THE GLOBAL<br>CAPITALIST SYSTEM; OR, HOW CAPITALISM AND U.S.<br>IMPERIALISM HAVE UNDERDEVELOPED BANGLADESH..... | 115  |
| 6. THE MARGINS OF THE MARGINAL: THE GENDERED<br>SUBALTERN IN BANGLADESH.....  | 146  |
| 7. DEVELOPMENT RHETORIC IN BANGLADESH: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE.....   | 174  |
| 8. UNSEVERED TONGUES: WOMEN’S LITERARY,<br>CULTURAL AND ACTIVIST PRODUCTIONS IN BANGLADESH.....   | 212  |
| 9. CAPITAL’S CLAWS IN GAS, COAL AND OIL: THE CORPORATE<br>COLONIZATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND MASS-LINE<br>ERUPTIONS IN PHULBARI.....               | 246  |
| 10. (IN)CONCLUSION: REVISITING CRITICAL INTERNATIONALISM,<br>FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AND U.S. IMPERIALISM.....                                     | 270  |

NOTES.....279

WORKS CITED.....310

APPENDIX

    A. INTERVIEW WITH SELINA HOSSAIN.....389

## LIST OF FIGURES AND DIAGRAMS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Fig. 1. The Concert for Bangladesh, Advertisement.....                                 | 39  |
| Diagram I: Scope of this Study.....  | 43  |
| Diagram II: Major Themes in This Study.....  | 47  |
| Diagram III: Some Nodes of Feminist Political Economy.....                             | 78  |
| Diagram IV: Orchestrated Class-Alliance Marking U.S. Imperialism.....                  | 116 |
| Diagram V: Indicators of the Status of Women in Bangladesh.....                        | 149 |
| Fig. 2. Policemen charge at economist Professor Anu Muhammad, <i>The New Age</i> ..... | 259 |

## **Dedication**

for Azfar and Salma

*ami tomake khub bhalobashi*

## CHAPTER ONE

### KNOWLEDGE THROUGH WESTERN EYES: MOVING CLOSER TO MY OWN TRUTH AND DREAD

this is not somewhere else but here,  
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,  
its own ways of making people disappear.

—Adrienne Rich, “What Kind of Times Are These”  
(*Dark Fields of the Republic* 3)

#### A Story: Upon Entering Bangladesh

Let me begin with a story that sheds some light on how I arrived at this topic. My husband and I moved to Bangladesh in 2006 with our eight month-old daughter and eleven suitcases in tow. For my husband, it was a homecoming after nine long years. For me, it was a “first” in a number of ways: the first time I had set foot in Asia, the first time in Bangladesh, but more importantly, the first meeting with my in-laws. Clutching my daughter in one arm and a carry-on in the other, my recurring thought was: “I hope they like me—they’re stuck with me now.” We had met in graduate school, gotten married in the U.S. His parents could not attend the wedding—they were elderly; his father could barely walk, only with a shuffle; his mother could not speak any English. For them, the thought of an international journey to attend our wedding was simply out of the question. I had talked to his parents many times over the phone—in English with his father, and in stuttering Bangla with his mother, repeating snatches of phrases that my husband taught me—“I love you,” “I can’t wait to meet you,” “the baby is doing fine”—



and looking to him for help when the responses came back in long sentences that I could not follow.

Then the day finally arrives when we are standing at the ticket booth, surrounded by our eleven suitcases, all full to the brim, the travel agent looking at us quizzically. “You’re moving to Bangladesh, I take it?” We nod. We’re exhausted, and want to get on the plane already. My daughter squirms restlessly in my arms. She wants to get a move on, too. The suitcases contain our clothes and personal items, of course, but mostly books that we know we will not be able to find in Bangladesh, and gifts for his family. On a graduate student’s budget, most of the gifts are second-hand or from discount stores. Ironically, we’re bringing back to Bangladesh many of the “Made in Bangladesh” clothes produced in sweatshops in Bangladesh but out of the range of affordability for the majority of people in the country.

The plane ride is mostly a blur of loading and unloading carry-ons, sleeping in awkward positions while trying to breastfeed. We have a six-hour layover in Saudi Arabia, in the middle of the night—not enough time to get out of the airport and look around, so we wait. Just after our plane lands, a sand storm descends on the airport. Sleep-deprived and dazed, we watch the swirling sand through the dark windows and listen to the howling wind in the dead of the night, all of which takes on a surreal quality in the relatively deserted airport. We create makeshift beds out of some clothes and carry-on luggage, and try to nap. As the morning hours approach and the boarding time for the flight to Dhaka grows near, our excitement grows. My husband has not seen his family since he visited after he finished his Master’s degree. Nine years later, with a PhD, a wife, and a daughter, much had changed for him. And for me: this is the big day, the day

I meet his family. I change into my *salwar kamis*, a traditional Bengali outfit for women, with a long tunic top, drawstring pants, and an *orna* (shawl) that his cousin had purchased for me in New York. I put on bangles and earrings. I'm excited for the big moment.

And then after a short flight (compared to the previous one), we finally arrive. From the moment I step off the plane at Zia International Airport in Dhaka, I am bombarded with the reality of intense poverty in Bangladesh. As I wait for my bags to come out on the conveyer belt, I see that most of the "baggage" circulating on the belt is nothing more than cardboard boxes wrapped in blankets and tied with string. My own wheeled luggage with handles stands out as an anomaly. And as I walk out of the airport gates, I am instantly made aware of the poverty and of my own white privilege: I am surrounded by beggars who are hoping for enough change to fill their bellies for the night, and no doubt hoping for the generosity of a weary traveler. I look through my wallet for some change. I don't yet understand the value of the currency I just exchanged in the airport. The numbers on the bills (100, 500) seem astronomical to me, and they start to sway before my eyes. With the intense summer heat and the jet lag, I feel dizzy, light-headed. My legs feel like rubber.

Then my husband's family emerges from the crowd: his brother and sisters, nephews and niece. They distribute some change among the beggars and then pull us away. There is a flurry of hugs and kisses and introductions, then we muscle the suitcases into taxi cabs and are whisked away into the crowded streets of Dhaka. The driver whizzes in and out of traffic, and we pass by Gulshan and Banani, the rich part of town. Then we enter Mirpur, a working-class part of town where my husband's family lives, and I see row after row of sweatshops—tall, gray, dilapidated

buildings with gates over the windows. My husband continually points things out to me as we drive: fish markets, fruit stalls, rickshaws, lumbering buses crowded to the point of people hanging from the doorways. My head spins, taking it all in. We made it. Finally. We're here.

### **Bangladesh as the “Other”**

This study seeks to cross and stretch—among other things—the boundaries of American studies by critically examining a particular “third-world”<sup>2</sup> site, namely Bangladesh, in relation to the U.S. In American studies, however, Bangladesh as a site or as a subject may appear irrelevant. But neither has the U.S. ever left Bangladesh since its emergence as a distinct and apparently sovereign nation-state in 1971, nor has Bangladesh remained outside the reach of global capitalism in which the U.S. continues to remain a major actor, the crisis of capitalism notwithstanding. But it is an irony that most Americans know very little about Bangladesh, and that the country hardly makes headlines, except for the occasional comment in the nightly news regarding the floods and devastating typhoons that wrack the country on a regular basis, and perhaps some clips of the politically-charged riots that break out occasionally. There are Americans who have never even heard of Bangladesh, or at least do not know that it is a country. When I turned in the paperwork for my marriage certificate in a small town in eastern Washington, the certificate came back with my husband's home country changed to “India” rather than “Bangladesh.” Apparently the clerk who filed the paperwork was not convinced that Bangladesh is an actual country.

But when Bangladesh does register as an actually-existing country within the hegemonic

mainstream of the U.S.—beyond the “Made in Bangladesh” tags on most of the clothes at WalMart—it represents little more than the frightening, mysterious world of the Islamic “other.” Even sometimes my husband—whose last name is “Hussain”—has been asked if he is related to Saddam Hussein. The vast distance between Iraq and Bangladesh seems to have no relevance, or the fact that the names are spelled differently. Or get this: as I was finalizing the revisions of this chapter, I received a phone call from a local insurance agent. Upon reading my last name, he said: “oh . . . Hussain . . . your husband drives cab, right?” I had to laugh out loud. If “Hussain” doesn’t sound like the name of a terrorist, then it sounds like the name of a cab driver, but certainly not a university professor.

How much “other” is this other, really? I can’t help citing a story—a real-life story from a friend of mine—one in which my friend’s friend exhibits her “knowledge” of Bangladesh by saying: “Oh, I’ve heard of Bangladesh. Isn’t that the Capital of India?” The Bengali feminist anthropologist Lamia Karim also relates some of the outrageous questions she used to get after she moved from Bangladesh (where she was born and raised) to the U.S. to attend college: “‘Do you have a written language?’ ‘The only factory in Bangladesh is baby production.’ ‘Is there a university in Bangladesh?’” (“Ethnography as a Decolonial Practice” 4). As Karim explains, these were questions from her fellow students, deans, and even professors. Such stories, indeed, keep multiplying, showing no signs of abatement, our increasing “globalization” notwithstanding.

Another story: once, when I told an acquaintance—a white, middle-class American woman from a small town—that I was planning to move to Bangladesh for several years, she responded with shock and horror: “Have you seen the movie *Not Without My Daughter*? You

better watch it. It might happen to you.” The film *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), directed by Brian Gilbert, portrays Islam as nothing but violent and cruel, and out to get the innocent white Christian woman: when the white woman enters Iran with her American-born daughter and her Iranian husband, he suddenly decides he wants to keep them there, and takes advantage of Islamic laws to beat and terrorize his wife. The racist stereotypes in the movie are combined with a chauvinist Christian nationalism: every night the mother and daughter pray to Jesus to take them back to America, and they finally manage to escape to the US with the help of a smuggler. Despite the movie’s setting in Iran, and the fact that it was a Hollywood production, it was still interpreted by my acquaintance as a perfectly legitimate example of why I should not travel to Bangladesh, given the fact that it is a Muslim-majority country. This is nothing short of anti-Islam hysteria, which, as some have argued, can be compared to even anti-Semitism. In his recent essay for *Counterpunch*, “Misplaced Anger: The Assault on Ilhem,” Tariq Ali puts it thus: “Islamophobes and anti-Semites share a great deal in common. Cultural or ‘civilizational’ differences are highlighted to sanction immigrant communities” (par. 7).

Now I could dismiss these interactions I’ve mentioned here as simply the result of ignorance, but I would argue, instead, that such ignorance is by no means ideologically neutral or innocent. Rather, it is representative of a gross lack of awareness of “the East,” and of Islam, in hegemonic American ideology and in popular culture. For many Americans, a movie such as this one is representative of the Muslim world, or the Arab world, or even the third world, including Bangladesh, regardless of the movie’s actual setting. Indeed, many Americans still do not know the differences between the Arab world, the Muslim world, the South Asian region, and even Mexico. Also, there is this racist, homogenizing assumption that all Muslims are Arabs, and that

all Arabs are Muslims. And there are even real-life stories that tell us how many Americans have mistaken Mexicans for Middle Easterners and Middle Easterners for Mexicans.

### **The (Other) Melissa Hussain Case**

Since taking on my husband's last name after we were married, I have been all-too aware of how my last name throws people off—it confuses them, or makes them nervous, or both. People are not sure what to think, because I am white but my last name is “Hussain.” Students who step into the classroom on the first day are surprised—they expected a woman of color. And a few years back, when I visited a friend in Texas, she asked me rather apologetically whether she should introduce me to her friends as “Melissa Hussain” rather than as “Melissa Tennyson” (Tennyson is my maiden name). I looked at her, rather perplexed, and told her that my last name is in fact Hussain, so of course she should introduce me that way. The unstated—and no doubt unconscious—point she was making is that “Tennyson” sounds like one of “us” (as in white people in a small town in Texas). But “Hussain”? Hussain sounds like a foreigner, and a very bad one at that—in other words, an Islamic foreigner, or a Middle Eastern foreigner, or a terrorist, or possibly all three.

Now let me share one more story in regards to my last name, a more extreme example of the anti-Islam racism and homogenizing assumptions prevalent in the U.S. While I was in the final stages of writing my dissertation, another woman with the same name as me—in fact, spelled exactly the same—who is also a teacher, was suddenly thrust into the national limelight (February, 2010) when she complained about her students on the online social networking site Facebook, and parents caught wind of this.<sup>3</sup> Given the fact that this woman—an eighth-grade

science teacher in North Carolina—was not a Christian (and a young woman who had stepped into the class as a mid-term substitute), her students were harassing her, and obviously trying to push her buttons. They gave her a bible and a Christmas card (with Christ underlined), while they also sang “Jesus Loves Me” in class instead of working on their homework. The students had also been insisting that she teach creationism in her science class. She threw the Christmas card away, and insisted that the students not sing the song instead of doing their homework, and that they stick to science instead of religion in the science classroom.

On her Facebook page, the teacher complained about her students (without naming any of them) to her friends, calling the bible gift a “hate crime,” and asserting that she “was able to shame” her students over the incident. Her major error, it seems, is that she had not established high enough security settings for her Facebook account, which meant that the parents of her students could read what she was saying to her friends, and they took offense.

Like me, this teacher is a white woman who took on the last name “Hussain” through marriage. Given the current national anti-Islam hysteria, a name like Hussain strikes a chord of hatred in mainstream America, particularly if it is connected to anything that is perceived as an attack on the religious right. Almost instantly after this story broke into local headlines, the religious right began to rally against this woman. Unfortunately for me, when people searched for information about her online, the majority of the links they found were for my own Facebook page, writing blogs, online articles, and websites.

People quickly and effortlessly assumed that she and I were in fact the same person, and various members of the religious right proceeded to flood me with hate mail and hate messages on my blogs, and began posting information about me that they could garner from the public

view of my Facebook profile and from the poetry and essays that appeared on my blogs and published articles online. (There were also supporters that immediately rushed to my side as well—this was, in fact, how I learned about the news story in the first place, through a friend request on Facebook that left me scratching my head—it was from a woman who said she was “so sorry to hear about what I was going through,” and I had no idea what she meant.)<sup>4</sup>

But the attacks persisted, nonetheless, and they even went to the extent of dragging my family and daughter into it, bringing up the case of my husband’s delayed immigration visa last year, and analyzing photos of my daughter with Santa Clause, contemplating why an apparent heathen such as I would allow my daughter to celebrate Christmas. And even after discovering that I was in fact a different person from the one in the news story, many from the religious right still felt completely justified in attacking me, given the fact that I have been fairly open about my own political views—which are far removed from theirs—in my writing that appears online.

In response to a post I had made on my writing blog, stating that I am not the same Melissa Hussain as the one in the news, one person wrote: “Yeah, but you're as big of a liberal kook (pardon the redundancy) as she is, so the attention is warranted. The last place any of you ever need to be is in the academic world.” Needless to say, elementary school is not part of the academic world. Furthermore, the academic world is, arguably, the last safe haven for liberals in the U.S. Facebook, however, is not a safe haven. And for the record, what is the crime I have committed? The “crime” seems to be that my thoughts and ideas do not sit well with those of the religious right—that thus apparently warrant the “liberal kook” label—while the “crime” is also that I have posted such thoughts and ideas online, and that my name is Melissa Hussain (in other words, guilt by association).



Had the teacher in the news story been named something more typically “American,” such as “Sarah Jones” or “Suzy Smith,” I doubt that people would have been so swift to assume any links that appear online for a person with that same name must all be connected to the same person. Granted, the name “Melissa Hussain” is quite uncommon in the U.S., but this does not negate the racist assumptions embedded in the reactions to the news story. For instance, people immediately assumed that she was Muslim, given her last name, although those who knew her at all clarified that she was agnostic, if anything. Consider this comment, for instance, that appeared in the response section to an online news story on the case (I have preserved the original spelling and punctuation):<sup>5</sup>

Please correct me if I am wrong here did I not see somewhere that all Hussains are blood relatives? Muslims Like Sadamm and countless others that are professed enemys of America. I think that she should go with her mate/partner back to his country and see how the right of freedom of speech is handled there, where women must cover their faces and never speak. We dont need these kind of people here, yes Mitch this country was founded on Christian beliefs by western europeans who intended it to stay that way and not become the worlds mother.

To state the obvious, the last names of Saddam and the teacher in question are in fact spelled differently, although this fact seems to be irrelevant to the person who posted this statement. Of course, both versions of the name (Hussain/Hussein) would be written the same in Arabic, and transliteration can go either way, with an “a” or “e” in the anglicized spelling. Nevertheless, the implication that anyone whose last name is closely or even remotely spelled like Saddam Hussein’s—whether or not they are from Iraq or even the Middle East—is likely to be related to him and thus to be an “enemy of America” is, of course, fundamentally racist. Also, white supremacy, Eurocentrism, and xenophobia are evident in this statement. Furthermore, I would argue that such a statement is indicative of the new racism that has emerged in the U.S.

since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, one that I would characterize as an Orientalist racism. That is not to say, of course, that Orientalist racism did not exist prior to 9/11—of course it did. But in the U.S. context, the flames have spread into wildfire since then. Or to put it another way, such racism can be characterized as an “anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, anti-Middle Eastern, anti-South Asian, anti-turban, anti-Hussein/Hussain/Middle-Eastern-sounding-name” kind of racism.

Indeed, all those conflations, homogenizations, and erasures of racial, national, and geographical specificities point to a hegemonically constituted historic bloc—to use the Italian Marxist-Leninist theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci’s famous terms—a bloc characterized by racism, that construes all Muslims or Arabs as terrorists within the long-standing tradition of American popular culture. The racist assumptions about the Islamic world and the misconceptions of Islam have definitely escalated since 9/11. In the dominant ideology, Islam equals terrorism and the Muslim-majority countries are terrorist countries, and hence any one seemingly associated with them in any way (through last names or otherwise) is considered suspect. These sweeping generalizations of Islam and of the Muslim world—including the Arab world, and by extension, the East—are, of course, what Edward Said theorizes and critiques not only in his major work *Orientalism*, but also in his documentary and historical work called *Covering Islam*.<sup>6</sup>

## Of Subjects and Specimen Under Western Eyes

[O]ne tires of being a subject and a specimen.

—Victor Villanueva, “Rhetoric, Racism, and the Remaking of Knowledge Making in Composition” (4)

It is through the lens of this ideology of Orientalism and imperialism that most of the Western knowledge of Bangladesh is produced and circulated. The reports and analyses of politics in Bangladesh that are globally available are those that have been produced *primarily* by the U.S. government, development agencies based in the West, or international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. In other words, although Bangladesh remains an object of study for the West, there is little regard for and engagement with the knowledge produced by Bangladesh’s own intelligentsia, social organizations, and activist groups that have a great deal to say about the relationship between the West and Bangladesh, and U.S. imperialism in particular. The logic of the power-knowledge nexus is very clearly at work here. Keeping this in mind, I also want to reflect on my own complicity in such “knowledge through Western eyes.” Given the very topic of Bangladesh as a site of study for me, it is imperative, I think, to acknowledge and reflect on my own privilege vis-à-vis a country in which the majority of the people do not have even their basic needs met. To erase the personal, in other words, would just be dishonest, as I cannot but be complicit in unequal power-relations.

The personal has gone through its own cycles of erasure and emergence in this work, it seems. With my first crack at this particular chapter, for instance, I begin with a paragraph about my own experiences arriving at the airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and what it was like for me. The culture shock. The immediate impressions. The emotions that overwhelm me. Then I cut it

out. I second-guess myself. Maybe it doesn't fit, I think. It feels unsafe, uncertain. Quotes, statistics, paraphrases all come easily enough at this point. But I face a mental block when it comes to talking about my own experiences: unconsciously, at least, I am convinced that "dissertation" and "personal narrative" are mutually exclusive. In other words, I'm not sure my stories count as scholarship. As I'm writing, I feel stifled, agitated. Stock full of quotes and citations, it looks like a typical dissertation. The argument is there, clearly enough. Yet I find that I am unconsciously slipping into the "objective" voice of academia, no matter how I try to avoid it. It's not that I reject academic writing. It has its place, and I need its conventions to make my points, to advance my argument. And I resist notions of a binary between academic writing (supposedly objective) and personal writing (supposedly subjective). There is no distinct line of separation—I know that it's all subjective, really. But still I feel lost, adrift in a sea of citations and footnotes. Where am I in all of this? I put the narrative back in the introduction.

I know that I have to find ways to speak of my own experiences, my own contradictions. For instance, even while I critique the exploitation of the labor-power of poor women, I am only too aware that I also participated in this while living in Bangladesh—for instance, I employed a woman as a domestic worker in my own household, a woman who cooked for my husband and I, did the grocery shopping, washed our clothes, and helped to care for our daughter. Of course, there are the typical guilt-ridden arguments to make (she needed a job, we paid her well, we treated her with respect and love, etc.), but such arguments remain nothing more than justifications and rationalizations. It is true, though, that not only the rich but also a significant segment of the middle class in Bangladesh does habitually employ domestic helpers. So the fact of the matter is that I did exploit her labor, no matter how well I paid her or treated her. The

pointed—and necessary—critiques of “racist feminism” that the black-lesbian-feminist-mother-poet (her own title) Audre Lorde made of white feminists who employ poor women of color as domestic workers (so, ironically, they can attend conferences on feminism and women’s empowerment) keep ringing in my ears.<sup>7</sup> In fact, I am reminded here of Caren Kaplan’s essay, “The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice,” for instance. Kaplan writes:

[F]eminists with socioeconomic power need to investigate the grounds of their strong desire for rapport and intimacy with the “other.” Examining the politics of location in the production and reception of theory can turn the terms of inquiry from desiring, inviting, and granting space to others to becoming accountable for one’s own investments in cultural metaphors and values. Such accountability can begin to shift the ground of feminist practice from magisterial relativism (as if diversified cultural production simply occurs in a cultural vacuum) to the complex interpretive practices that acknowledge the historical roles of mediation, betrayal, and alliance in the relationships between women in diverse locations. (139)

In other words, my own complicity in the exploitation of labor-power is something I cannot erase from my work. I cannot pretend that it isn’t relevant to my “research,” a term that remains extremely loaded for the colonized, given its historical and ongoing direct relationship with exploitation. I am reminded here of certain observations that Linda Tuhiwai Smith makes about “research” in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. [...] It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and

then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (1)

In his (forthcoming) essay “Rhetoric, Racism, and the Remaking of Knowledge Making in Composition,” Victor Villanueva makes similar observations in regards to the ways in which research is linked to racism and imperialism. For instance, he points to the significance of the fact that “the studies that look at people of color are observations through white folks’s eyes” (“Rhetoric, Racism” 3). Within the context of composition studies, he underscores the inherently unequal power-relations and racism embedded in projects of white scholars who “study” people of color—as he puts it, “one tires of being a subject and a specimen” (4).

And yet another problem that we face in terms of looking at development is that often the very institutions which offer Western scholars opportunities to conduct studies in third-world sites—various development agencies or the World Bank, for instance—are institutions that are actively working to exploit the poor in those countries. In fact, scholars coming from what has been called a “postdevelopment”<sup>8</sup> perspective have argued that the very paradigm of development itself does little to dismantle unequal power-relations on a global scale, but in fact deepens and consolidates the exploitation of land, resources, and labor—in Azfar Hussain’s terminology, “land, labor, language, and the body.”<sup>9</sup> Take this example from Adele Mueller’s essay “Women In and Against Development,” for instance, of the ways in which the discourse of development remains embedded within capitalist exploitation:

A Development professional . . . had just returned from carrying out an evaluation of an adult education programme in a Third World country. Once in the field, she had found that the programme she was to evaluate actually consisted of political conscientization in opposition to the Government. Returning to her university, she became concerned that she possessed information which would enhance her career but might well endanger the people from whom she had learned it. Her thesis would be sent to the funding agency and from there to the ‘host country,’ where it might be used to threaten the work and even the

lives of the people who had made themselves available to her study. Her responsibility, as she saw it, was to the people whose political commitments she had come to respect. She decided she could not write of what was actually going on. Instead she chose to write a standardized evaluation of the adult education program. And this is the thesis that sits on the library shelf at her university and is an item in the agency's data bank. (qtd. in Simmons 245)

The very paradigm within which this development professional worked gave her no options, in other words, to accurately represent the work of the people running the education program without directly participating in their oppression. This is just one of many examples of the ways in which developmentalist frameworks variously limit and confine research, dictate the role of the researcher, and ultimately exploit those who remain the Object of research.

There are better ways to do "research," to work in solidarity. The rhetorician Linda Flower puts it thus: "Listening is a highly constructive, interpretive activity under the best of conditions. But in circumstances like this, are we likely to 'hear' or infer the experientially shaped, situated knowledge and the silent logic that 'others' are using to make meaning in the midst of our dialogue?" ("Talking Across Difference" 39). In other words, Flower argues the case for a kind of openness in listening that places listening *itself* at the center rather than interpretation or pre-conceived theoretical frameworks.

I am also drawn to Chandra Mohanty's understanding of feminist solidarity and her critique of the "western eyes" of Western feminism. Mohanty argues that much of Western feminism ends up reinscribing unequal power relations and erasing important differences in the name of feminist solidarity, when it comes to the construction of "The Third World Woman."

For instance, she writes:

I would like to suggest that the [Western] feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular "Third World Woman"—an

image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourses. I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the “third world” in the context of a world system dominated by the West on the other, characterize a sizeable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world. (335)

The last line deserves repeating: “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the “third world” in the context of a world system dominated by the West on the other, characterize a sizeable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world” (335). This article is now considered a classic in postcolonial feminism. But Mohanty revisited the article in a chapter of her book *Feminism Without Borders*, which came out in 2003. The chapter is entitled “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles.” While Mohanty clarifies certain points and recants others made in her original essay, she basically sticks to her original thesis. She also critiques certain postmodernist readings of her work, attributing some of the misunderstandings and even appropriations of the essay to “the triumphal rise of postmodernism in the U.S. academy” (225). Mohanty resists being called a postmodernist, and argues that she is being misread when she is “interpreted as being against all forms of generalization and as arguing for difference over commonalities” (225). She argues that “this misreading occurs in the context of a hegemonic postmodernist discourse that labels as ‘totalizing’ all systemic connections, and emphasizes only the mutability and constructedness of identities and social structures” (225). As the very title of her chapter suggests: “Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles,” she does envision feminist commonalities, but on



the basis of resistance to an economic structure, not on the basis of one belonging to the category “Third World Women.” Mohanty further argues:

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders. (226)

I find the nuances of Mohanty’s revision to her article particularly useful at this point in history when we can see capitalism in a stage of crisis. There is clearly a need for solidarity in resistance to the exploitative, oppressive, and ecologically destructive logics of capitalism.

Let me then explain the kind of approach I intend to take with regard to Bangladesh—a contestatory approach opposed to anthropologism, Orientalism, and the kind of postcolonial theory that remains inattentive to political economy or the macro-logics and micro-logics of capitalism and imperialism in all their patriarchal manifestations and configurations. In other words, I strive for an interrogative, oppositional, and politically active approach that values and seeks to forge a solidarity of resistance.

## **The Pitfalls of Anthropologism, Development Paradigms, and Contemporary Missionary Humanism**

We have a history of people putting Maori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define.

— Merata Mita<sup>10</sup>

I am not suggesting that anthropologists will work as hand-maidens of imperialist powers. I am predicting that a structural dependency will grow between the imperial powers' need for local knowledge, and anthropologists' need for research money (increasingly controlled by private foundations) and their ability to conduct work in the field that are increasingly under the jurisdiction of imperial powers.

—Lamia Karim, "Ethnology as a Decolonial Practice" (22)

Anthropology as a discipline is rooted in colonialism. And I should provide a note of caution at this point. Although Bangladesh might look like a case study here, it is not meant to be one of those case studies that claim to deliver authentic knowledge and truth about a given geographical site such that the subjects inhabiting that site as well as their experiences and events are all decisively epistemologized. Indeed, some of such studies have already been called "area studies," characterized as they are by the kinds of knowledge-production of which a number of anticolonial theorists and activists continue to remain skeptical and critical. Edward Said, for instance, is exemplarily critical of the kinds of area studies that have shown Orientalist tendencies, to say the least.

My initial contextualization of Bangladesh is marked by such a theoretical awareness of the pitfalls of area studies, while at the same time it suggests that a specific geographical location can at least be a symptomatic but overdetermined site for the critical examination of actually-existing production-relations and power-relations—how they operate and how they affect people

in their concrete locations, in their movements, and in their struggles. Thinking of such a symptomatic but overdetermined site, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, speaks of “critical regionalism” in her dialogue with Judith Butler in *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (91). Spivak explains critical regionalism thus: “It goes under and over nationalisms but keeps the abstract structures of something like a state. This allows for constitutional redress against the mere vigilance and data-basing of human rights, or public interest litigation in the interest of a public that cannot act for itself” (94). In other words, as Spivak alerts us, one should be cautious against the mere reporting on a country from the vantage point of the metropolis, the kind of reporting that, for instance, characterizes the country reports routinely produced by the World Bank.

As I am trying to demonstrate in this study some of the crucial effects of U.S. imperialism on the third world, of course I could have chosen to study any number of sites. But the reasons for my intended focus on Bangladesh are quite simple. I have had politically significant encounters and interactions with Bangladeshi writers, teachers and activists, while I have had experiences of being part of certain movements there. Of course, living in a country does not automatically indicate “authenticity” and “knowledge”—Mary Louise Pratt rightly critiques tropes of Western travel writing that valorize the Western Subject against the backdrop of the Other. Pratt characterizes such travel literature as writing through “Imperial Eyes.”<sup>11</sup>

And there is no getting around unequal power-relations inherent in the “contact zones,” to again invoke Pratt.<sup>12</sup> But I value the quality and nature of the political experience in a particular site that awakens in one critical resistance to misappropriation and domination, while informing my practice by the continuous awareness of unequal power-relations. In fact, I am

critical of what is called “anthropologism,”<sup>13</sup> characterized as it is by authenticating interventions made by the Western subject and by the oracular and empirical examinations of sites and subjects through the “Western Eyes”—to use Chandra Mohanty’s expression—in the name of first-hand experiences of living in a community or country of the “Other.” Yet, as I discussed earlier, I endorse the kind of ethnography that Lamia Karim articulates in “Ethnography as a Decolonial Practice”—an ethnography that is an “archive without walls” (1), a dialectical process of not only examining oneself in relation to others, but also of examining the production of knowledge in relation to its context.<sup>14</sup>

Also, remaining attentive to the danger of a possible anthropologization of the “Other,” I focus on certain symptomatic and crucial issues and areas that are not otherwise engaged, and I focus on them in the interest of anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, feminist, and antiracist movements. Capitalist globalization, of course, has made certain information available in the West—think of the reams of World Bank reports on third-world countries, including Bangladesh—while ignoring other agents and actions, particularly those that are truly dissident, resistant, and oppositional. Thus, for instance, through the World Bank reports we know about the development of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, because it is a deep-rooted capitalist process in the rural areas, serving global capitalism well, but we do not know anything about the Phulbari resistance movement,<sup>15</sup> which is an ongoing anticapitalist mass-movement in Bangladesh aimed particularly at U.S. and multinational oil, gas, and coal corporations which are hell-bent on exploiting, extracting, and owning national resources in Bangladesh.

In other words, even the whimper of the subaltern might be heard—and even attended to with some tokenizing aid and relief—but the threatening scream of the subaltern is usually

brutally suppressed, repressed, or completely ignored. The World-Bank-style or Western-NGO-style humanism—or, as I call it, “contemporary missionary humanism”—waxes lyrical on the need for alleviating poverty, and to that end, the World Bank and Western-based NGOs will make third-world subjects and sites available to the West in certain commodifiable, even highly individualist ways. But when third-world subjects can no longer be commodified or appropriated, their voices are ignored or even erased, or passed over in utter silence. It is this silence—loud, yet unheard, but surely threatening to the establishment—that I seek to engage in the context of Bangladesh by using my research and political experiences.

The silence in question has been a topic in contemporary South Asian and postcolonial studies. That which is left out and not articulated has duly been the concern of quite a number of postcolonial theorists. Indeed, Spivak’s question—“Can the subaltern speak?”—is a relevant one here, a question about the politics of silence and silencing. As Spivak rightly puts it:

Take, for example, the case of Bangladesh. You will hardly ever find an entry from Bangladesh in a course on post-colonial or Third World literature. Stylistically it is non-competitive on the international market. The UN has written it off as the lowest on its list of developing countries, its women at the lowest rung of development. (“Teaching for the Times” 16-17)

However, it is symptomatic and telling that many of the followers of Spivak—while exploring silences, gaps, absences—have talked about problems relating to India, while completely bypassing or, at best, tokenizing Bangladesh. In other words, it would be no exaggeration to maintain that contemporary South Asian studies and postcolonial studies, “critically-regionally” speaking, are dominated by India, followed by Sri Lanka, while Bangladesh—already called the periphery of the periphery—remains a periphery of the periphery even within postcolonial studies. In this study, however, I do not claim to address this massive gap alone—since an

individual's effort is by no means sufficient, but necessary—but surely, I want to mark a small moment of my participation in a struggle that ascribes a fundamental importance to Bangladesh as a site of oppression and opposition in today's globalized world.

### **The Pitfalls of Postcolonial Theory**

[O]ne cannot help but suspect that the postcolonial sublime flourishes in the wreckage and misery of global capitalism.

— E San Juan, Jr. (*Beyond Postcolonial Theory* 254)

I also want to address certain dangers and limits within postcolonial theory as they pertain to my study. In the following chapter, I will discuss certain threads within American studies that would attempt to bring the field into dialogue with postcolonial studies in productive ways. In his essay “Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies”—an essay which I also discuss in the next chapter—Leerom Medovoi asserts that “in a world with such urgent political imperatives, a dialogical convergence between postcolonial and American studies seems so timely” (178). But let me also point out here that scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, E. San Juan, Jr., Arif Dirlik, Chandra Mohanty, Benita Parry, and Azfar Hussain have all variously argued that postcolonial studies as a whole has lost much of its radical edge as it has become invested in postmodernist discourse analysis at the expense of historical materialist inquiry.<sup>16</sup> As E. San Juan, Jr. puts it in his article “Postcolonialism and the problematic of uneven development”: “In essence, the most blatant flaw of postcolonial orthodoxy (establishment postcolonialism employing a poststructuralist organon) lies in its refusal to grasp the category of capitalist modernity in all its global

ramifications, both the regulated and the disarticulated aspects” (222).

Indeed, much of postcolonial theory has reached a theoretical dead-end because of its lack of attention to the political economy of capitalism as it relates to imperialism, neocolonialism, and even fascism. Even Gayatri Spivak—who ardently identified herself as a postcolonial scholar in *The Postcolonial Critic* (1990)—has meanwhile grown largely dissatisfied with the field of inquiry. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999)—mark the title: *A Critique*—she writes:

Postcolonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame. Colonial Discourse studies, when they concentrate only on the representation of the colonized or the matter of the colonies, can sometimes serve the production of current neocolonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past, and/or by suggesting a continuous line from that past to our present. (1)

The “general frame” Spivak invokes in the above statement is nothing short of global capitalism itself, to which San Juan characteristically and repeatedly calls attention in his critiques of postcolonial studies. Although San Juan and Spivak of course do not come together on many scores, I invoke both scholars here to make the point that some of the major voices in postcolonial theory have themselves become dissatisfied with the field’s scope and scale of analysis, as it has become invested in the postmodern academy and the fetishization of culture. It is worth reminding ourselves that the 9/11 attacks on U.S. soil were not aimed at cultural centers or the American way of life as such. Rather, they were aimed at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, at capitalist finance and military—blatant signs of the times as well as real events to take lessons from.

When postcolonial studies cannot draw these crucial connections the field is thus itself complicit in the erasure of the political economy of the center/periphery relationship. So, in other words, if postcolonial studies is going to remain relevant and meaningful to the “two-thirds world” outside of the ivory tower and the metropolis, it must as a field enact a dialectical approach, using the analytics of Marxist theory and political economy in order to draw connections between capitalism and the imperialism and even fascism of the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Now, with such a critical awareness of the shortcomings embedded in anthropologist approaches and the approaches of certain versions of postcolonial theory, let me then turn to Bangladesh as a symptomatic but overdetermined site of oppression and opposition in today’s globalized world.

### **Ethnography From Below: Decolonial Moves in Bangladesh**

In an essay entitled “Ethnography as a Decolonial Practice,” the Bengali feminist anthropologist Lamia Karim offers a model of solidarity within the field of anthropology, and in the context of Bangladesh, a kind of anthropology from below that veers away from the anthropology paradigm in favor of that of ethnography. Karim writes:

Through an analysis of incidents in the “field,” I argue for an ethnographic model of collaborations—of the fragmentary and the conversational, of the imaginative and the vulgar, of the institutional and the personal. These incidents I narrate here—anger, refusal, silence, complicity—may appear as trivial incidents but they are events that are meaningful sites of knowledge production. The incidents are sudden irruptions in the everyday life of the ethnographer, but they contain within them larger issues that inform the place and imagination of the ethnography. The ethnography I write about is not a social science discourse that seeks to comprehend the processes of globalization, nationalism, social movements, etc., with a well-developed methodology that harnesses



the data. It is an archive without walls. (1)

Karim borrows this concept of the “archive without walls” from Betty Joseph, of Rice University. I am intrigued by this idea, and reminded of so many incidents that I encountered while in Bangladesh, moments producing flashes of insight, of understanding. They are incidents much like those Karim describes—scattered irruptions, often seemingly trivial. But they inform the practice of everyday life, create glimmers of meaning and knowledge that sometimes fit within my own preconceptions, sometimes moving beyond them completely. Karim’s discussion, in fact, reminds me of Gramsci’s pronouncement that “events are the real dialectics of history.”

Furthermore, Karim’s ethnography is one of “decolonial moves” (5), an ethnography which challenges the power-relations inherent in colonialism. Karim describes decolonial moves as

ethnographic encounters through which I learned to examine myself in relation to others, and the production of knowledge in relation to the context within which it was being constructed. I am also arguing that it is at sites of everyday interactions that ethnography can perform decolonizing moves, unveiling the anthropologist’s hierarchies, biases, and limits that might otherwise remain opaque. (5)

I abandon the general approach of mainstream anthropology which is, after all, a product of colonialism, and which would certainly not expose or even take into consideration the limitations set by the anthropologist’s own perspective. But this “ethnography” is something different altogether, and it appeals to me, particularly the self-critical lens through which the anthropologist operates. And I am not trained in ethnography, and have not done “fieldwork” in

the traditional sense. But yet the moments, the scattered conversations, interactions, and experiences I have had over the course of my stay in Bangladesh weave a kind of tapestry of meaning, one that is incomplete and constantly shifting, but yet substantial. Also, Lamia Karim rightly ascribes importance to what she calls “sites of everyday interactions,” but I think those “microsites” also need to be placed within what Spivak already called “the general frame,” without which events tend to run the risk of being mere floating signifiers.

However, I am aware of the fact that it is quite different for a white woman to do ethnography in the context of Bangladesh than it is for a woman of color, even given her class privilege. Karim writes of this in her essay, of working alongside a white American woman who was conducting research in Bangladesh, and the ways in which the white woman was readily accepted in a village, given her white privilege:

One day I went with the young American woman to her village. When she arrived at the village, everyone wanted to be seen with her although she spoke no Bengali. The women in the village dragged her to their homes. The status of these rural women went up with a white guest in their huts.

I was left by the sidewalk. As a local brown woman, I was no object of status or curiosity. Next to a white American woman, what symbolic power did I bring? Bringing me home would signify failure. I was not even second best. The bus-driver took sympathy on me and said, “How come they didn’t take you? You too are from America.” For him, America meant a green-card, and it was not about the color of one’s skin or one’s gender or national origin. (15)

Karim further reflects on the significance of this incident:

Why did the rural women reject me and embrace the white woman? The American woman symbolized western wealth and power. Westerners are considered as rich as Croesus. Friendship with her would mean access to material benefits. Middle-class Bangladeshis are not known for their charity. What could they get from me? The American woman was also the remnant of a colonial fetish. The white woman was both the male colonizer’s and male colonized’s fantasy, why not the fantasy of colonized

women? [...] This encounter was in excess of the colonial mentality. The fetishized white woman had come to meet the rural women on their turf. The rural women were no longer going to the memsahib's home. There was a symbolic leveling of the hierarchies between them. Now *she* came to them. She had come wearing a sari. She ate their food. She sat with them. They felt, even if symbolically, more equal at that moment. This symbolized a greater victory. The whites were no longer in power in Bengal, but people like me were. Hailing me would not change the boundaries of power. At the end of the day, I would still represent the oppressive patron, and they, the clients. (15-16)

I see myself in the story, and am reminded of the ways in which I, too, was immediately the local celebrity in any village which I entered. I recall that after arriving in one village, for instance, a village in which my husband's extended family lived, we had laid down for a short nap, and meanwhile a crowd swelled around our bedroom door, demanding to meet me, until my sister-in-law sheepishly dragged me out so that everyone could meet the white woman. It was my whiteness that was the draw—my sister-in-law, coming from the city, held little if no interest for them. In fact, I was reminded every single day of my whiteness in Bangladesh. Beggars always addressed me as “Madame” nearly every time I left my house. And once when our car got pulled over by the police, as soon as they saw my white face, they apologized profusely and just waved the car on by. And “Fair and Lovely” cream—a classic example of internalized colonialism in the form of an extremely corrosive beauty product—is probably the hottest beauty product on the market. (There is also “Fair and Handsome” cream for the men now, too.)

Thus, I am hesitant to appropriate Karim's model of decolonial ethnography, given my own white privilege, class privilege, and national privilege in relation to poor women from the rural areas in Bangladesh. But I am still drawn to Karim's critique of social science methodologies that organize and “harness” data into neatly predesigned models and theories. I know this doesn't work. For instance, the reams of World Bank and NGO reports that keep

coming out with new data, new independent variables, new statistics and percentages, claim to document the status of women in Bangladesh. Yet somewhere in the process, women become objects—particularly poor women—and information that does not fit into the confines of pre-set variables is simply dropped, discounted.

To ask a very simple question: Who do these reports—such as the World Bank ones that are churned out on at least a yearly basis—really serve, after all? I am reminded of certain basic questions that the Maori indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith asks in *Decolonizing*

*Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples:*

When studying how to go about doing research, it is very easy to overlook the realm of common sense, the basic beliefs that not only help people identify research problems that are relevant and worthy, but also accompany them throughout the research process. Researchers must go further than simply recognizing personal beliefs and assumptions, and the effect they have when interacting with people. In a cross-cultural context, the questions that need to be asked are ones such as:

Who defined the research problem?

For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?

What knowledge will the community gain from this study?

What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?

What are some likely positive outcomes from this study?

What are some possible negative outcomes?

How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?

To whom is the researcher accountable?

What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher?

(173)

Understandably and obviously, such simple—yet profound—questions remain entirely absent from the World Bank reports or those of western NGOs and donors in Bangladesh. As I think about my encounters with poor women in Bangladesh, I attempt to remain conscious of my own power, and to foreground the kinds of questions that Smith highlights. I do not wish to romanticize the experiences of poor women in Bangladesh, or fixing and freezing them as

victims. The “survivor” motif is yet another form of fixing and freezing—as Elora Shehabuddin puts it, it is equally damaging to “romanticize all poor rural as shrewd survivors” (*Reshaping the Holy* 5). Both paradigms are disabling, and strip women of their own agency and voice. Neither do I want to speak for them, to construct their stories in such a way as to fit my own research and paradigm, so as to advance my research agenda. And in doing so, I also try to move closer to my own truth, my own dread.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Let me now provide an overview of the chapters that follow. In chapter two, I provide a general overview of the scope of my overall project, while I also offer a rationale for why American studies as a field needs to further engage in what has been called “critical internationalism.” In response to certain culturalist trends within the field of American studies, I assert that it is impossible today to account for the political and cultural configurations of the U.S. without examining the ways in which it remains connected to the rest of the world through the interlocked and interrelated systems of exploitation and domination such as capitalism and U.S. imperialism. In other words, I argue that a critique of capitalist imperialism—or imperialist capitalism—must be central to any project of “critical internationalism” within American studies.

In chapter three, I offer a rationale for using the tools of feminist political economy and rhetorical critique in American Studies. I argue that political economy as a methodology has been marginalized, if not completely ignored, in American studies, and feminist political economy even more so. I further assert that much of American studies as a field dissociates the cultural from the economic, and that this functions to erase the connections between culture and

the production, circulation, distribution, and consumption of cultures within the global capitalist economy. Furthermore, drawing on the works of Victor Villanueva and Deirdre McCloskey, I attempt to expand the field of rhetoric to engage the discourses of political economy, arguing that such a critique would always benefit from foregrounding an active dialectic between culture and the economy, and between the rhetorical and the material world.

I theorize, historicize and contextualize the presence of the U.S. in Bangladesh in chapter four, so that we can understand how U.S. imperialism functions in a given third-world site, affecting the practice of everyday life. I offer some alternative historical accounts of U.S. imperialism in Bangladesh, accounts that would not be available in any world history book on Bangladesh. Furthermore, I argue the case for a contestatory approach, one that is opposed to anthropologism, orientalism, and the kind of postcolonial theory that remains inattentive to political economy or the macro-logics and micro-logics of capitalism and imperialism in all their patriarchal manifestations and configurations.

In chapter five, I examine the integration of Bangladesh into the global capitalist system, arguing that this very integration is a product of an “orchestrated class-alliance,” as Azfar Hussain calls it, through which capitalism and its logical extension, imperialism, operate and reproduce themselves. This orchestrated class-alliance, as I argue, brings together the U.S. government, U.S. corporations, the national ruling class in Bangladesh, NGOs, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. Also, I assert that this approach would help us understand the very nature of people’s struggles in Bangladesh—particularly women’s struggles—against imperialism, and for that matter, against other macrostructures of domination such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy, as they are all variously

interlinked.

Chapter six provides an analysis of the current status of women in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the gendered subaltern. I discuss certain representative spheres in which women have been either present or absent in Bangladesh, such as: 1) the public sphere and national politics, 2) education, 3) violence against women, 4) health, 5) reproductive labor and the family, and 6) paid labor. I offer certain symptomatic instances of the status of women in Bangladesh, particularly of the ways in which poor women in Bangladesh are subject to multiple forms of violence, oppression, and exploitation, and end up bearing the largest brunt of oppression and exploitation that come as a direct result of the underdevelopment of Bangladesh. But, in resistance to the World Bank and other NGO documents that tend to fix and freeze poor women as objects of oppression, minus agency, I also underscore women's agency in a number of ways.

I interrogate the rhetoric of development in Bangladesh in chapter seven, particularly the rhetoric of two major development institutions: the Grameen Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). While these institutions approach the question of development in different ways, and with different tools, I argue that they are fundamentally linked on an ideological level in that they both announce their aim as developmentalist in character. Second, while they both claim to work in the service of poor women in Bangladesh, I elucidate how they end up exploiting and oppressing poor women, particularly with the case of USAID's eugenist-racist distribution of the contraceptive Norplant and with the case of the Grameen Bank's celebrated micro-credit loans that are primarily given to poor women. I argue that a rhetorical critique of USAID and the Grameen Bank can illuminate the discourse of

development, which is by far the dominant discourse in the West when it comes to speaking of Bangladesh in general, and is particularly prominent in regards to women's liberation and issues of gender in the context of Bangladesh.

In chapter eight I bring together various women's literary and cultural productions emanating from Bangladesh. I begin by discussing the rhetoric surrounding the case of the feminist writer Taslima Nasreen, who has been exiled from Bangladesh since 1994, based on the fatwa that was placed on her head for her critiques of Islamic fundamentalist violence against Hindus in Bangladesh in her book *Lajja* ("Shame"). I examine the ways in which Nasreen's case has become international, and the rhetorical framing of her case on an international stage. I focus particularly on the reception of her work, and the ways in which she has come to represent *the* voice of women in Bangladesh for Western feminists and human rights activists. It is the *reception* of her work that I find problematic, particularly the ways in which her work is isolated as the primary voice of dissent emanating from Bangladesh. Thus, in this chapter, I also talk about other feminist literary, cultural, and activist productions in Bangladesh that have received very little attention internationally, particularly focusing on the feminist novelist Selina Hossain, with whom I also conducted an interview. A basic argument of this chapter is that literary and cultural criticism should not be dissociated from political economy or from activist politics. I also talk about how certain literary and cultural productions contest various structures of power and domination.

I offer a rhetorical critique, in chapter nine, of a movement that has erupted in Bangladesh over the course of the last few years. This movement that has come to be known as



the “Phulbari movement.” Workers, farmers, left-activists, members of various communist parties, and scholars—including numerous women—have been involved in this movement against Western gas and oil companies, including the American energy company ConocoPhillips. The main target of the Phulbari movement has been Asia Energy Corporation (now renamed Global Coal Management), which has proposed an open coal mining project in the northwest region of Bangladesh (the Phulbari region—hence, the name of the movement). The coal mining project, if carried out, will displace approximately 50,000 people of about 100 villages. Global Coal Management and other companies continue to move forward with their projects, and are supported by organizations such as USAID which has engaged in its own “development” project of (literally) mapping out the natural resources in the country, including gas, coal, clay, peat, alluvium, limestone, and sandstone.<sup>18</sup> However, the wide-scale resistance movement is an ongoing one, and has much to teach us in term of resistance to U.S. imperialism in a third-world site and in terms of how feminist politics also turns out to be anti-imperialist politics in such a context.

Finally, in the (in)conclusion, I offer some thoughts on how this project can be further developed in terms of the application of “critical internationalism” and feminist political economy within American Studies, while I also make some theoretical observations about the current crisis of global capitalism as it is expressed in Bangladesh. Furthermore, I argue the case that the tools of rhetorical analysis remain politically useful—and even crucial—in the contemporary conjuncture, one in which there is tremendous crisis, but also tremendous hope for a better, a more just world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORY AND METHOD, PART I: INTERNATIONALIZING AND STRETCHING THE TERRAIN OF AMERICAN STUDIES

The field of American studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo.

—Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: the Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture”

Bangladesh is the periphery of the periphery under global capitalism.

—Samir Amin, *The Future of Maoism*

To speak of Bangladesh in the West is to speak of a land devastated by natural disasters and characterized by poverty. There is no doubt that Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, while it is also true that Bangladesh is annually devastated by disasters which, however, are not so natural because they are manufactured and made by dominant systems. Such truths notwithstanding, the West stereotypes Bangladesh without examining why Bangladesh, in the first place, is a third-world country, while remaining ignorant of, or bypassing, its long, rich history of resistances and struggles.

—Badruddin Umar, *Nirbachita Prabandha* (Selected Essays)

Capitalism has erased the history of women in Bangladesh, the most exploited segment of the global population.

—Selina Hossain, an interview

#### **Western Representations of Bangladesh: Sanctioned Ignorance and the Power/Knowledge Nexus**

In the first chapter I spoke of the general ignorance regarding Bangladesh in mainstream American society today and of problematic, imperialist-racist “western eyes” approaches to research vis-à-vis Bangladesh. Now let us turn to Bangladesh itself. In this era of so-called globalization, Bengalis—given their actual interactions in their day-to-day lives, as well as their

various discursive practices, including the knowledge-productions in different domains—exhibit sometimes astonishingly detailed knowledge of the U.S., its history, its culture, and its contemporary affairs. As I myself have experienced, even in the streets of Dhaka, the poor vendors and hawkers know something about the U.S. How, then, do we account for this difference—the fact that any poor Bengali on the street has at least some basic knowledge about the U.S., while most Americans know little, if anything, about Bangladesh, besides making the most stereotypical, racist assumptions?

To put it simply, because of the long history of U.S. imperialist interventions in Bangladesh since its independence—a history which has been variously and repeatedly documented by the leading Bengali left theorists and writers such as Badruddin Umar, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Anu Muhammad, and Azfar Hussain (particularly by Badruddin Umar in his two-volume work called *The Emergence of Bangladesh*)—Bengalis cannot afford to remain ignorant about the U.S. in opposition to what Gayatri Spivak calls the “sanctioned ignorance” of first-world subjects.<sup>1</sup> Yet Americans are privileged enough not to have to know about what the U.S. government is doing in and to a country like Bangladesh. But despite the general ignorance, the U.S. government and western financial institutions are heavily involved in Bangladesh.

Examples of certain textual representations would hopefully render intelligible the point I have made above—ones that represent Bangladesh in certain symptomatic ways. Let’s look, then, at a few representations of Bangladesh coming from various sources in the West—one from a rock star, one from an international financial institution, and one from the U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh. Although the representations emanate from three ostensibly different sources, they nevertheless forge in the last instance a common ideological constellation. Let’s

examine the constellation closely.

### **The Concert for Bangladesh**

Now I'm asking all of you to help us save some lives.  
—George Harrison, “Bangla Desh”

The first representation can be immediately located in the relatively popular song of George Harrison. The two most common things most Americans seem to know about Bangladesh are that it floods there a lot, and that there was a famous concert for Bangladesh put on by George Harrison in 1971. In the concert, Harrison performed his own song, “Bangla Desh”: “My friend came to me with sadness in his eyes, / Told me that he wanted help / Before his country dies. / Although I couldn't feel the pain, / I knew I had to try – / Now I'm asking all of you / To help us save some lives” (par. 1). The Concert for Bangladesh was organized to provide relief to refugees from the newly widespread massacres perpetrated by the Pakistani army in 1971, and to provide aid, following the massive devastation in Bangladesh caused by the 1970 Bhola cyclone, the deadliest tropical cyclone ever recorded at that point in history (an estimated 500,000 people lost their lives in the storm—something surely comparable to the contemporary earthquake in Haiti).

The all-star cast of performers included Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Ringo Starr, and George Harrison, among others. The event was actually the largest benefit concert of such magnitude in the history of the world, and remains a nodal point in what T.V. Reed terms “rock and roll activism” (*The Art of Protest* 156).<sup>2</sup> The Concert for Bangladesh had a certain critical role to play in opening up a general awareness within the U.S. of the crises in Bangladesh. In fact, it raised awareness of the cyclone—and subsequent famine—in Bangladesh and of

Bangladesh's national liberation war. But the concert was fraught with problems similar to Live Aid's benefit concert for the African famine of the 1980s, a concert which Reed asserts "recycled some of the most problematic humanist ideas, from patronizing, patriarchal 'charity' and philanthropy to deeply racist, imperialist echoes of 'the white man's burden'" (*The Art of Protest* 160). For instance, if we look closely at the text of Harrison's song, "Bangla Desh," we immediately notice that Bangladesh is not even correctly spelled in the song. And more significantly, Harrison—whose songs I otherwise admire—came to know about Bangladesh only because his Indian friend, the great musician Ravi Shankar, told him about this region. Then Harrison felt the responsibility of rescuing the wretched of the earth living in Bangladesh by asking people to provide relief.

Of course, in times of disasters, given structural constraints, "relief" is necessary, to the extent that it addresses the plight of the victims. But if relief becomes the only issue for a large group of people fighting life-and-death battles for their emancipation, one cannot help raising questions like "What does knowledge do?" and "Whose knowledge is it, anyway?" There is no doubt that Harrison at least unwittingly plays into the Western tradition—even the Orientalist tradition—of reproducing stereotypically the "suffering" other called Bangladesh. My admiration for George Harrison and Bob Dylan notwithstanding, I can't help but assert that such a benefit concert—cashing in on the exchange-value of recreation and entertainment—does not necessarily make people critical about the causes of poverty, let alone equip people with the critical knowledge of how and why poverty is produced and reproduced on global and local scales. Note, then, how the image of an emaciated Bengali child sitting before an empty plate was used to advertise the concert:

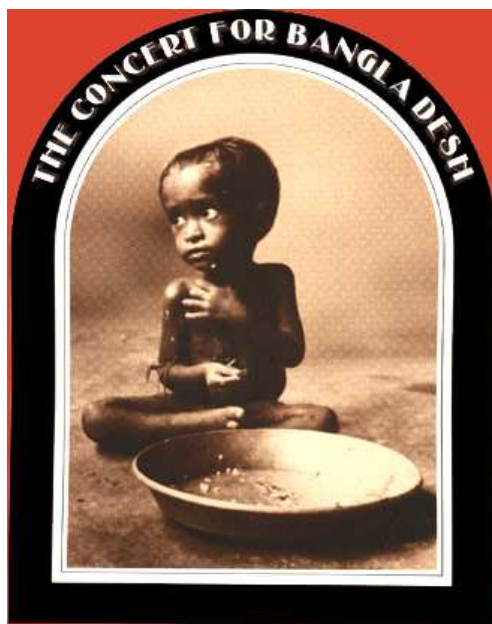


Fig. 1. The Concert for Bangladesh, Advertisement

Such an image invokes a kind of “tear-soaked humanism” always already manufactured in the metropolis, but does not necessarily help us understand why the plate is empty, or the roles that capitalism and U.S. imperialism have played in emptying the plate, or to be aware of the fact that USAID withheld several million tons of food aid in order to ensure that Bangladesh would end its trade relationship with Cuba (and thus sending the food aid when it was too late for famine victims).<sup>3</sup> That said, I do not dismiss benefit concerts wholesale. Reed rightly argues, for instance, that “‘benefit rock’ events are important because they are among the most compelling attempts to create moments of ‘popular global culture,’ in contrast to ‘global pop culture.’ They are riddled with political contradictions and limitations, but they also suggest one possible, progressive axis of transnational communication in this globalizing era” (157). But in the case of the Concert for Bangladesh, the communication was unidirectional and did not necessarily generate transnational communication in the way that other concerts may have done since then.

In fact, there was a heated debate regarding whether the money raised from the concert ever actually reached the poor people in Bangladesh as it had intended to.

### **The World Bank and “Poverty Assessment”**

Now let me move on to interrogate another symptomatic representation devoted to Bangladesh for a brief rhetorical analysis and *Ideologiekritik* to see, among other things, the interplay between the rhetorical and the ideological. The World Bank publication “Poverty Assessment for Bangladesh” (2008) provides the following passage: “Bangladesh represents a success story among developing countries. [...] For all its progress, however, Bangladesh remains a poor country” (xiv). Now, the question is: what does it mean for a county like Bangladesh to be a “success story,” yet remain poor? Yet another question is: what is progress? From whose perspectives is this progress measured? Of course, the story is rhetorically constructed, and the World Bank’s enunciation in fact reveals something more about the ideology of the World Bank itself than the people of Bangladesh and their class struggles.

Here the World Bank needs to focus on the “success story” simply because this success is the success of a system that has impoverished Bangladesh already—the system of global capitalism itself, a system which drives and which is driven in a number of ways by the World Bank itself. The so-called success of capitalism in the case of Bangladesh will not be rendered credible if it said that the country’s poverty has been obliterated altogether. Indeed, poverty is so stark, so staggeringly visible that it would be really preposterous to deny the reality of poverty in Bangladesh. So instead of examining the causes of poverty in Bangladesh, the World Bank is more interested in talking about whatever “success” it has achieved so that the real causes of

poverty are never really addressed, in the interest of paving the way for transnational corporations and the national bourgeoisie to exploit the poor in the country. It should also be emphasized—as the country’s leading political economist Anu Muhammad has already noted in his study of the World Bank, *Development or Destruction? Essays on Global Hegemony, Corporate Grabbing and Bangladesh*—that success stories routinely fashioned and circulated by the World Bank are actually the stories trumped up to glorify either the structural adjustment programs or certain corporate interventions, or—at best—NGO interventions that supposedly ameliorate poverty in Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Role of the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh**

To dwell on yet another representation and enunciation, the former U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, James Moriarty, recently (in 2009) maintained in his “Remarks at the Harvard Conference on Bangladesh Media as Development”: “I like to describe U.S.-Bangladesh relations in terms of three D’s: democracy, development and denial of space to terrorists” (par. 8). The “three D’s” for which Moriarty advocates represent an entire realm of discursive practices within the U.S. government, one in which the ideology of imperialism is cloaked in the rhetoric of democracy.<sup>5</sup> Mark this: it is Moriarty who has made this statement—and it was Moriarty who was an ambassador to Bangladesh during a politically turbulent time in the country when emergency was declared in January 2007 and an anti-democratic, military-backed interim government came to power at a time when I was teaching in Bangladesh.

That military-backed interim government, in fact, was directly supported by the U.S. in the name of the very three things Moriarty mentioned at the Harvard conference: democracy,



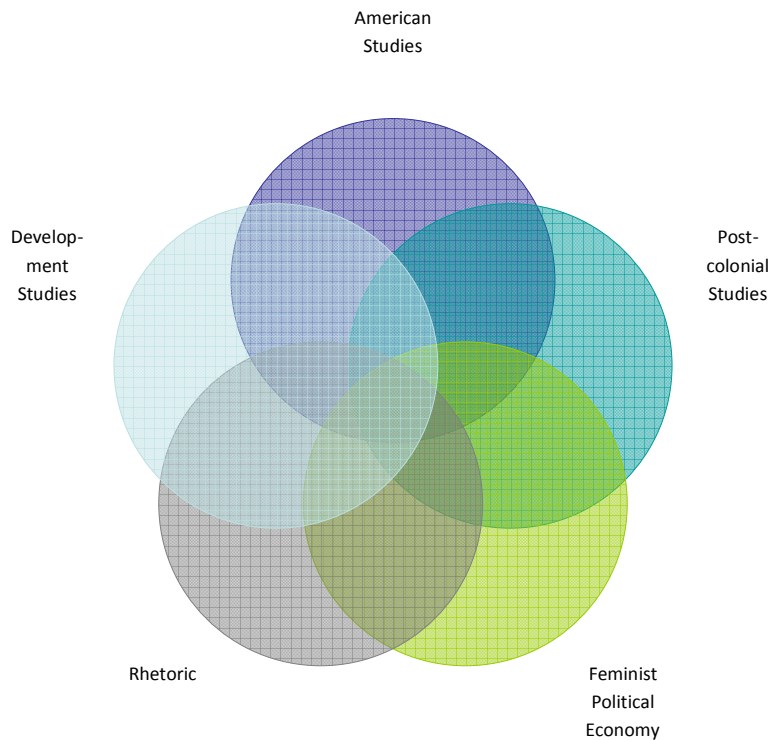
development, and denial of space to terrorists. In other words, Moriarty's rhetoric cannot be dissociated from what he actually did and what actually happened in Bangladesh during the emergency time, as it was called. As a matter of fact, Moriarty's own presence was unabashedly visible on the political scenario of Bangladesh at the national level. In the name of democracy, development, and anti-terrorism, Moriarty—while representing the U.S. government—went to the extent of dictating Bangladeshi politicians, of course bourgeois politicians, to carry out the U.S. bidding. The mainstream bourgeois political leaders—because of their class-interests and because of the possibilities of monopolizing power in the country—listened intently and enthusiastically to Moriarty's dictates. It was, indeed, an exemplary case of U.S. domination in the national political scenario, where the usual rhetorical arsenals of democracy, development and anti-terrorism were routinely deployed.

Through such representations, of course, Bangladesh is portrayed as a country that needs U.S. interventions for its own development, democracy, and security from the Islamic fundamentalists while such representations blank out the people themselves—their socioeconomic predicament caused by a long history of external and internal colonialisms, including, of course, global capitalism, as well as their ongoing struggles against U.S. imperialism, as instanced in the case of the Phulbari resistance movement, which I will discuss later. There is also this implicit portrayal of the people of Bangladesh as inert objects who cannot act but who can only be acted upon. Thus the U.S.-Bangladesh relationship is the paradigmatic subject-object relationship that underlies and governs the representations of Bangladesh in and by the U.S. In other words, U.S. imperialism itself consists of these kinds of representations and knowledge-productions of the Other.

## Mapping the Terrain of This Study

This study is an attempt, at least in part, to interrogate critically the problematic of the knowledge-production of Bangladesh by the West—the production of knowledge that is also the production of power, and *vice versa*. Interdisciplinary in nature, this study, while located broadly within American Studies, draws on other discursive domains such as postcolonial studies, development studies, feminist political economy, and rhetoric. For the sake of conceptual convenience, let me present diagrammatically the intended interdiscursive and interdisciplinary conversations that characterize the present study:

**Diagram I: Scope of this Study**



## Scholarship as Activism

One nodal point in the constellation of interdisciplinary conversations in this study is the connection between American Studies and feminist political economy, informed by what I call “critical internationalism.” I argue that the perspective of what I further call “critical international feminist political economy,” if developed and elaborated, can help us account for the vastly unequal and exploitative gendered-racialized international division of labor which is itself a product of current global capitalism with U.S. imperialism at its center. Also, I argue that a critical international feminist political economy approach would help us examine dominant hegemonic blocs which are rhetorically constituted and reproduced, while also dialectically examining the rhetoric of oppositions and resistances in such a way that a critical international feminist political economy does not remain merely anchored in analysis, but also moves in the direction of accounting for and pointing out the possibilities of emancipatory action. In other words, the present study aims at an active, even activist, dialectic between analysis and action.

That being said, I should register a caveat. The diagram provided above is not to be construed as a decisive model for any study. For me, it is a tentative and provisional interdisciplinary framework, nothing less, nothing more—a framework within which, however, certain specific issues can not only be engaged but also explored further. In other words, my goal here is to draw out some politically and theoretically useful connections that may be explored further in the interest of both analysis and action. I take cues from the movement theorist and cultural critic T.V. Reed, who argues in *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements* that the book “is not meant as a call for others to follow a plan I have already worked out; it is, rather, a call from inside a set of problems for the

assistance of others in exploring new and renewed ways of bridging the distance between criticism and activism” (xv).

In a similar vein to Reed, Joel Pfister calls for bridging the gap between activist politics and cultural studies. In *Critique For What?: Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies*, Pfister discusses what it means for an intellectual to be “politically engaged.” He argues that scholars committed to progressive politics should move beyond cultural or transnational studies, in order to imagine “social transformation studies, activism studies, political mobilizing studies, organizing studies” (3). He points out that the word “strategy” appears in plenty of books and articles as of late, but “in its academic postmodern guise ‘strategy’ usually signifies theoretical preoccupations and not much more” (3). I am drawn to Pfister’s objection to critique for critique’s sake, and his commitment to scholarship that can be useful for social change.<sup>6</sup> Pfister, in fact, offers a brilliant overview of the current trends in American studies towards *culturalism*, devoid of political usefulness. Let me quote from Pfister at some length on this issue:

When I think back to the lists of Left discussion groups and advertisements for Left cafés that abounded in *New Left Review* during its first two years, I find it telling that, nowadays, there is little discussion of organizing in cultural studies publications and conferences. [...] In both 1960 and 1989 [Stuart] Hall was apprehensive about politics being “too narrowly conceived” by the British Left, and yet American communications sociologists, like Gitlin, when confronted with a very cultural style of U.S. cultural studies, caution that “politics in the strict sense” must not be forgotten. In *Another Tale to Tell* (1990) Fred Pfeil states his intention to contribute to “the *collective* project of imagining new ends, and coming together in new ways to reach them,” and he regards his writing as just one arena of his political work. (*Critique for What?* 48)

And here Pfister asks a critical question, one which sums up the basic thrust of his book:

How strategic does a U.S. cultural studies wish to be, and should its “oppositional” studies be channeled into writing about a collective project in more detailed ways? I think that we can interpret the muting of this concern within U.S. cultural studies as one symptom of its professional-managerial-class “Americanization.” (*Critique for What?* 48)

Although Pfister does not explicitly frame his argument in terms of political economy, the links that Pfister makes between the depoliticized nature of cultural studies today and the class interests of the “professional-managerial class” who produce the scholarship have to do with political economy itself, which is one of the major areas of my intervention in this study. My intention here, then, is to build on the activist approaches to American studies that T.V. Reed and Joel Pfister both call for. Thus I attempt to dwell on cultural politics by, however, avoiding the pitfalls of *culturalism* on the one hand, and to examine political economy—remaining, however, critical of economic determinism—on the other, while I also relate both cultural politics and political economy to the production of rhetoric which, again, is anchored in political economy itself.

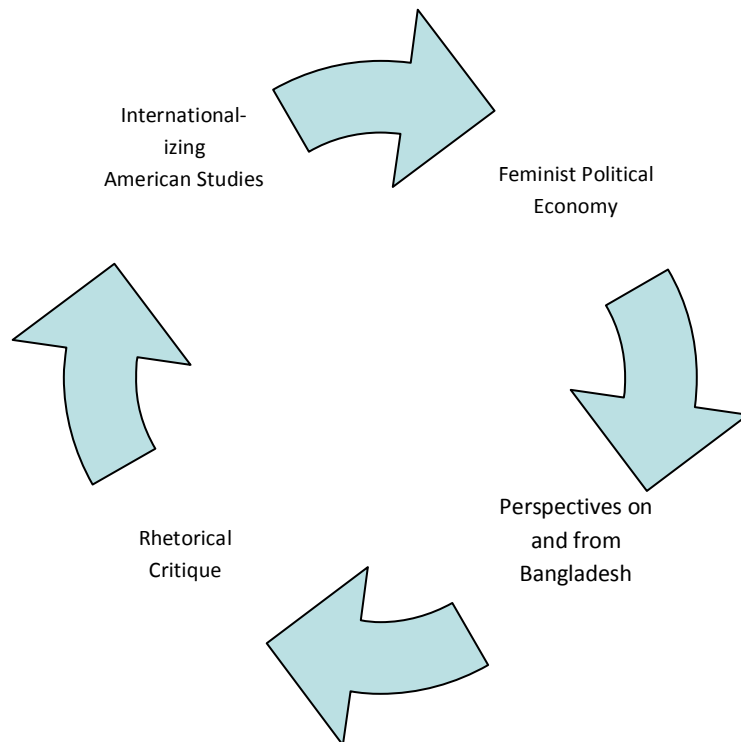
### **The Scope of This Study**

Another major characteristic of my study is that it emphatically foregrounds, draws on, and mobilizes the positions and perspectives of a number of Bangladeshi theorists, writers, and activists who are otherwise either unknown or fully ignored in American studies and in the West. I argue that such theorists, writers, and activists have much to offer in terms of our critical understanding of how U.S. imperialism functions in relation to women in the third world, or for that matter, how capitalism itself becomes imperialist through exploitative racialized-gendered international divisions of labor.

Thus the scope of my study is threefold. First, I argue the case for how and why American Studies needs to take up feminist political economy and the question of U.S. imperialism by “internationalizing” the field of study. Given the fact that I agree with Pfister’s

critique of transnational studies—the kinds of studies that, according to Pfister, fetishize analysis but lack activist dimensions—the internationalism I speak of promotes social justice and international solidarity beyond mere theoretical or cultural analysis. In regard to this argument, Bangladesh provides an crucial and overdetermined site of both theoretical and political interventions. Second, I draw on and mobilize some of the perspectives coming from Bangladesh that differ from the received knowledge of Bangladesh produced by the West and thus offer more critical and politically significant ways of understanding capitalism, imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and other global structures of power-relations. Third, I apply the tools of rhetorical analysis in order to read critically certain texts and signifying practices that I engage here. A tentative diagram showing the connections among my thematic preoccupations may be presented in this manner:

**Diagram II: Major Themes in This Study**



In other words, in the above diagram, internationalizing American studies would involve perspectives on and from Bangladesh, while both would involve rhetorical analysis of various texts and contexts (although I will move beyond the text-context dyad in the traditional sense). Perhaps the most fitting terms for what I am studying here are not “text” or “context” in the traditional sense, but rather the Gramscian concepts of “the conjunctural” and “the organic.” Conjuncture, in this instance, moves beyond the model of text-fetishizing literary criticism, and emphasizes the overdetermined relationships between the economic, the cultural, the political, and the historical, the kind of complex of relationships that both Gramsci and Althusser have theorized in their works. For instance, Gramsci, while speaking of “crisis” in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, articulates his notions of the conjunctural and the organic.<sup>7</sup> For Gramsci, then, the conjunctural points to a complex of relations at a given historical moment while the organic refers to relatively stable, sometimes even patterned structural forces and factors that have historically evolved. The relationship between the conjunctural and the organic is a relationship between a specific moment and a totality of moments, if we talk of such terms across temporal dimensions in history.

Also, although she does not explicitly mention Gramsci, Hazel Carby offers a model for studying the conjunctural as opposed to the text-context dyad. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Carby describes her project not as “a conventional literary history” but as “a cultural history and critique of the *forms* in which black women intellectuals made political as well as literary interventions in the social formations in which they lived” (7, emphasis mine). While she does examine “individual texts,” she defines her primary object of study as “the dominant ideological and social formation in which they were

produced” (6).

In order to further clarify the scope of my study, it may also be useful to define my project in terms of what it is *not*. There are two immediate and potentially debilitating problems that may arise from some of my major arguments. First of all, there is always the possibility that the project of internationalizing American Studies—no matter how anti-imperial the project may appear—could quite easily become appropriated and redeployed, even in the service of U.S. imperialism. In fact, I would argue that this kind of appropriation has already been made in various ways, an issue that I will take up in the next section. But let me emphasize the point that this study is strictly opposed to the attempts to impose an imperialist framework of analysis on a third-world country for the sake of profit. Of course, as I’ve indicated, there is always the possibility—and risk—that however counterhegemonic<sup>8</sup> my intentions are, in reality the project could serve to reinforce the power-structure of the “Western Eyes”—as Chandra Mohanty has famously put it—gazing upon a third-world country like Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> But the representations of Bangladesh that I offer here are the kinds of symptomatic representations that remain opposed to capitalist appropriation right from the get-go. Of course, I do not claim to speak on behalf of the subaltern, to invoke Gayatri Spivak.<sup>10</sup> And let me quote, then, from Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to elaborate my point further:

[...] the intellectual within socialized capital, brandishing concrete experience, can help consolidate the international division of labor. The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. (275)

Keeping this very real contradiction in mind, then, my intention here is to speak and write *with* the activists, writers, and scholars with whom I have interacted rather than speaking *for* them.



Furthermore, this act of solidarity—as I would like to call it—cannot bypass the responsibility of focusing on specific sites and subjects with which and with whom I am in solidarity.

Also, I do not claim here to offer anything like a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary predicament or politics of Bangladesh, something which is beyond the scope of this study. I will only touch on certain symptomatic and crucial sites and events. Of course, a number of other scholars within American Studies have already asked the question of how to address U.S. imperialism in American Studies, and I have learned much from them. However, I have something to add to the conversation. Therefore, let me turn to one of the major rationales for this project in which I will explain, in brief, the need for such a project. I argue for why American Studies as a field of study needs an active deployment of “critical internationalism,” to borrow the term from Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez (“Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism” 475). In the third chapter, I further extend the rationale for this project, arguing the case for why the tools of feminist political economy and rhetorical critique should also be vital to American Studies scholarship.

### **Critical Internationalism in American Studies or *Coca-Colonization*?**

*Let us be clear: imperialism is a worldwide phenomenon, stemming from the existence of a hegemonic centre—the United States—which dominates and exploits its ‘periphery,’ that is the tricontinental sphere.*

—Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Social Dialectics Vol. II* (129)

In order to discuss “critical internationalism” in American studies, I need to return to the question of Bangladesh. What does a country like Bangladesh have to do with American Studies? Indeed, this is one of the driving questions of my study. One of my major working

assumptions is that it is impossible today to account for the political and cultural configurations of the U.S. without examining its connections to the rest of the world through interlocked and interrelated systems of exploitation and domination. In other words, the question of imperialism, I would argue, is central to any attempt to internationalize American studies. Internationalizing American studies without a continuous and rigorous discussion of the ways in which imperialism as an overdetermined global structure of power-relations affects the practices of everyday life, both inside and outside the U.S., would remain profoundly inadequate.

In order to address this inadequacy, this study—while paying attention to the logics of U.S. imperialism—remains attentive to both political economy and culture, as they continue to remain variously linked in this era of globalization, which I take as a euphemism for U.S. political and cultural imperialism. In fact, it is rather screamingly obvious today that U.S. cultural imperialism is at work in Bangladesh. In other words, we notice an ongoing U.S. “coca-colonization,”<sup>11</sup> as some have called it, of an entire range of Bangladeshi cultural practices, although there are manifold and complex resistances to such “coca-colonization” (used as a trope here for U.S. cultural aggression and dominance). There are, indeed, all sorts of ways in which the U.S. continues to invade Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, for instance, American music and movies, food, merchandise, and clothes are readily available, to begin with. A number of American-based clothing companies employ sweatshop labor in Dhaka in order to produce the clothing at a minimal cost, and one of the byproducts is that the leftovers and imperfections that don’t make the quality cuts for shipments to the US are sold in the local markets. Yet the garment workers are paid so poorly, they are barely able to afford to feed and clothe themselves and their families, let alone buy a pair of GAP jeans they have sewn with their own hands. Also,

despite the fact that Bangladesh is a former British colony, the upper and middle-classes in the country today continue to privilege with some kind of “class pride” what they call “American English.” Badruddin Umar contours the role of the U.S. in Bangladesh in other concrete and direct contexts as well:

[T]he US continues to subject Bangladesh to unequal agreements and treaties. Economic agreements such as the Trade and Investment Forum Agreement (TIFA) and other military agreements such as science and technology agreements relating to biological warfare, the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Agreement (2000), and the peace corps agreement are a few glaring cases in point. And the ruling class of Bangladesh keeps signing such imperialist and subjugating agreements only as a desperate attempt to survive somehow in its current power and position. (“Call to Convention” 6)

So, in other words, American Studies is very significantly tied to a country like Bangladesh. And to speak of Bangladesh in the context of U.S. imperialism is a symptomatic, critical move in the direction of internationalizing American studies. Of course, an immediate question that comes to mind is: if we internationalize American Studies, could that not be a form of U.S. imperialism dressed up in sheep’s clothing? The danger is undoubtedly there. Let me further explain, then, what I mean by internationalizing American cultural studies. First of all, by internationalizing such studies I do not mean a kind of international multicultural buffet, where American cultural studies scholars broaden the menu items to include a sampling from all around the world. This is why the “critical” in “critical internationalism” is crucial. What I mean by “critical” is a perspective that constantly recognizes, critiques, and challenges unequal production-relations and power-relations on a global scale—hence the importance of political economy affecting culture, and that of culture in turn affecting political economy in the equation, dialectically speaking.

Let me turn to some—if not many—American Studies scholars who have already made

the argument for a critical internationalism in various ways. I find a handful of works particularly useful in terms of mapping out connections between American Studies, critical internationalism, and political economy. Such works, for instance, include Joel Pfister's *Critique for What? Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies*; John Carlos Rowe's *The New American Studies*, and his edited collection *Post-nationalist American Studies*; George Lipsitz's *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*; Amy Kaplan's and Donald Pease's edited collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*; Donald Pease's and Robyn Wiegman's edited anthology *The Futures of American Studies*; and Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front*.

In *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, one particularly critical issue John Carlos Rowe brings up in his introduction is that many scholars ignore the fact that “[i]n its claims to encompass the many cultures and political organizations in the Western Hemisphere, the new American Studies threatens its own kind of cultural imperialism” (26). Rowe further argues:

There are commonly overlooked practical factors driving the popularity of American Studies outside the United States, such as “the growing number of American-educated Ph.D.s teaching in other countries, the lure of relatively high-paying research grants and temporary teaching positions in the United States, and the prestige of publishing in the United States.” In short, the border dividing “native” and “foreign” versions of American Studies is increasingly difficult to draw. We distinguish the new American Studies from older versions not only for being more inclusive and diverse but also for its vigilance with respect to its possible uses in the cultural imperialist agendas central to U.S. foreign policies from the Marshall Plan in postwar Europe to the multinational “alliance” we assembled to fight (and legitimate) the Gulf War. Yet just what separates cultural understanding from cultural imperialism is increasingly difficult to articulate in an age of technologically accelerated human and cultural mobility. (26-27)

Rowe makes a critical point here: that the “new”—expanded and more diverse—American Studies is not removed from the possible function of serving U.S. imperialism, even as it may seem to serve a different purpose. Elsewhere, in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, Rowe also discusses this critical problem in terms of the Janus-faced nature of the American literary

tradition, and the fact that “Americans’ interpretations of themselves as a people are shaped by a powerful imperial desire and a profound anti-colonial temper” (3).<sup>12</sup> To return to his focus on the field of American Studies, in *The New American Studies*, Rowe points to some of the cultural imperialist agendas that American Studies has propped up:

We are now familiar with the ways the American Studies of the post-World War II era “often was enlisted in the service of quasi-official governmental policies and institutions” and how its success as a field of study could sometimes be tied to the exportation of American cultural ideals based on extraordinarily limited models of American identity and experience. (55)

Of course, Rowe is interested in moving American Studies away from a cultural imperialist approach. He argues that the new American Studies has, in fact, developed a “postnationalist perspective” (54), one which has criticized and moved away from American exceptionalism and has “focused on the many cultures that have been marginalized by traditional American Studies or subordinated to an overarching nationalist mythology” (51).

While I would agree with Rowe that this postnationalist perspective—note, postnationalist, not postnational; there is a huge difference in meaning here—is a necessary move within American Studies, I question the rather unspoken assumption here that culture remains the common denominator as the object of study, whether one employs a multiculturalist approach or not. For instance, in his discussion of the tremendous growth of American Studies programs globally, Rowe contends that “[a] common purpose linking these different versions of American Studies should be the critical study of the circulation of ‘America’ as a commodity of the new cultural imperialism and the ways in which local knowledges and arts have responded to such cultural importations—the study of what some have termed ‘coca-colonization’” (56). Now, certainly it is worthwhile to study the manifestations of American cultural imperialism, and the

ways in which this “coca-colonization” is resisted and challenged in third-world sites. But another important question that we must ask is how cultural imperialism is directly linked to other forms of imperialism, including economic imperialism. For instance, Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean write in *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* that the widespread dominance of Hollywood globally may have “less to do with ‘affectionate reception’ than with the expansion of global capitalism, supported by Washington’s trade policies, and the evolution of international agreements under GATT and WTO, which encouraged American access to foreign markets” (290). While Campbell and Kean do not make this point very forcefully (they offer this perspective as just “one argument”), I would say that cultural imperialism is intimately tied up with economic imperialism, and that these connections can be seen dialectically (not mechanically, of course) with the tools of political economy.

What I am calling for here, then, is a strong shift in the theory and practice of American Studies in order to make political economy central to the field. This is by no means my argument only. In fact, I draw on E. San Juan, Jr.’s essay, “Challenging the Theory and Practice of Contemporary American Studies,” in which he emphasizes the need for doing political economy within American studies, while pointing to the problems embedded in the focus on multiculturalism within American Studies. San Juan writes that “[i]n our globalized milieu, multiculturalism has supposedly trumped the nation, or nationalism, as well as white supremacy” (309). But, as he asks, “[i]sn’t the world market pluralism incarnate, multiculturalism in action?” (309). In other words, San Juan argues that multiculturalism and additions to the canon in and of themselves do little to change the status quo:

As oppositional scholars, we are all indebted to the once radical, anticanonical move of inclusion (women and minorities) accomplished by [American Studies’] most well-

known practitioners, Paul Lauter and his collaborators. Countless students and teachers have surely expanded their knowledge and appreciation of U.S. literature as a variegated fabric of multiethnic and multigendered strands, with disparate origins and cultural histories. Aesthetics and historical contextualization, the play of diverse voices and their conversations, have projected an image of America as “plural, complex, heterogeneous—a chorus, perhaps, rather than a melting pot.” Lauter, however, poses two questions in the preface to the fourth edition of his Heath anthology which the discipline of American Studies continues to grapple with: “What differences did difference make?” and “How would our understanding of *all* American culture be transformed by their inclusion in the cultural conversation?” Additions to the canon do not of course necessarily alter the theoretical hegemony of “One Creed Under God” exceptionalism (Church, 2002). (San Juan, “Challenging the Theory and Practice” 310)

And San Juan goes on to argue that what is needed within American Studies is a radical change in approach, a focus on how the field will actually do something to combat—meaningfully—capitalism and U.S. imperialism:

With the flattening impact of globalization, Lauter reflects, American Studies with eclectic methodologies will be reshaped by international events [...] even while the discipline is shaped and adapted in the metropolis according to local circumstances. But will these changes in the discipline affect or alter “the power of U.S.-based capitalism” which James Petras (1999) considers the matrix of imperialist globalization? While recognizing the privatization and deregulation of educational institutions, Lauter is silent about the IMF, World Bank, WTO, and their effects on the control and distribution of cultural capital, including canon revision, textbook publishing and distribution, and so on. (San Juan, “Challenging the Theory and Practice” 310)

Like San Juan, I am interested in finding ways to orient American Studies towards a more activist engagement with the political economy of U.S. capitalism in the interest of change, however small it is.

Now I argue that the concept of “critical internationalism” within American Studies certainly opens up spaces of possibilities for enacting an activist approach attentive to the questions of political economy as they affect the practices of daily life, both inside and outside the U.S. However, there is not one common definition of “critical internationalism.” A number of competing definitions have already been advanced by scholars of similar and different

persuasions. For instance, in 1996, the first call for “critical internationalism” in American studies appeared in *American Quarterly*, the major journal for American Studies. Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez published an essay there, instructively titled “Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism.” Desmond and Dominguez insist that the study of the United States be situated in a global context, and they call for a new kind of scholarship about the U.S. that gives full attention to macro-processes such as globalization. And in a later essay “‘America’ and the Changing Object of Study”—the preface to the collection *Rediscovering America: American Studies in the New Century* (2001)—Desmond and Dominguez further reflect on how American Studies might be internationalized, arguing that a study of “transnational flows in relation to nationalistic configurations is one way for American Studies to go in this ‘new millennium’” (21). In other words, they call for an increased emphasis on the transnational movement of both people and things, without erasing the specificities of national contexts. However, they do not really articulate how to approach the study of “transnational flows”—that is, they do not offer a distinctly effective methodology. I argue that using the tools of political economy can both inform and enhance the approach for such a study.

Let’s take another example of the already-advanced call for “critical internationalism” in American Studies. In 2000, the journal *American Studies* (sponsored by the Mid-America American Studies Association) devoted a special issue to the topics of globalization and transnationalism. In one of the articles in this issue—“Can American Studies be Globalized?”—Bernard Mergen asks some of the same questions of American Studies as Desmond and Dominguez already did, but Mergen comes to rather different conclusions. Mergen emphasizes the fact that since the inception of American Studies, scholars from outside the United States



have been heavily interested in its project, while arguing that in order to “globalize” American Studies, the field should take seriously the input of international scholars. But by no means does Mergen inaugurate a paradigm shift within the field. In fact, he contends: “American Studies will be most useful to understanding globalization if it maintains its historic purpose of describing, comparing, and explaining the core of the national culture of the United States” (315).

The problem I have with Mergen’s approach is that he tends to recenter the United States more than anything else by way of including more voices from outside the U.S. In other words, broadening the horizon of cultural studies, for Mergen, is actually recentering the United States in ways in which the “Other” is reproduced as the “Other”—always pressed into the service of the “Self” (the U.S.). Also, Mergen completely separates the cultural from the economic, and therefore isolates American cultural studies from the real of the economic. For instance, he theorizes why other cultures have been so heavily influenced by American culture, coming to the conclusion that “the Americanization of other cultures seems to be about experimenting with new identities more than mere imitation” (309). But the elephant in the room here is the political economy of cultural imperialism; Mergen does not address the politico-economic forces that are driving this Americanization of other cultures. In order to place cultural phenomena in their larger contexts, and thus to examine them effectively and more critically, I argue that American Studies as a field requires a conscious and major shift in its methodology and purpose, deploying the tools and analytics of political economy.

Of course, some—if not adequate—efforts have been made in this direction. For instance, there was a recent move towards a “critical internationalism” within American Studies that relates to political economy. Norman R. Yetman’s and David M. Katzman’s observations in

“Globalization and American Studies” (2000)—another article in the special issue of *American Studies* I mentioned above—are particularly worth mentioning here. Yetman and Katzman insist that American Studies must internationalize in order to remain relevant. At the same time, they recognize that the concept of “internationalism” itself is a highly contested terrain. They clarify, then, what they mean when they use the term:

It seems to us that for American Studies effectively to “internationalize,” we need a radical organizational transformation; we propose that American Studies be resituated within a broader framework (or, institutionally, within the organizational framework) of “global studies” in which American Studies would be one among several constituent “area studies.” But the primary focus would not simply be to examine the United States, but to shift the focus to an even broader unit of analysis—for example, the world-system, to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s terminology—and, armed with the kinds of models that might emerge from this shift in focus, to return to considering American society and cultures. In other words, we need to do more than encourage and support the voices of international scholars studying in the United States; we need to *globalize* its study: to shift the focus of American Studies to examine much more fully and critically the role of the United States in the global system in its multiple dimensions. Such a programmatic shift would enable *American Studies* to become truly international in focus; it would enable us to observe the ways in which the United States has impacted and is impacted by the global and transnational forces of which we are increasingly aware but with which we cannot yet fully and effectively come to grips. (9)

I agree with Yetman’s and Katzman’s overall contention that we need to do more than just listen to the voices of international scholars within the preexisting framework of American Studies, while I also commend their focus on Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-system” as a broader unit of analysis, which means really globalizing its focus. Of course, using Wallerstein means doing political economy or, for that matter, analyzing capitalism on a global scale, areas with which his work is concerned. Yet Yetman and Katzman do not concretely define the “global and transnational forces” they speak of that American studies should address, nor do they sustainedly pursue a world-systems analysis of American studies as such.

Moreover, I should register a particular caveat here in order to make a critical distinction

between the terms “critical internationalism” and “transnationalism.” Put simply and quickly: the term “transnational” is often used to refer to transnational corporations and transnational financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, which differentially function in the interest of first-world capitalist accumulation. I think it is dangerous for American studies to adopt a “transnationalist” approach, if it is meant in the sense of celebrating the kind of transnationalism created by global imperialist capitalism. Also, as E. San Juan, Jr. points out in his article “Challenging the Theory and Practice of Contemporary American Studies,” the term “transnationalism” runs the risk of erasing the specificities, historical and geographical, of both sites and subjects while also mystifying the violence that capitalism perpetrates on those sites (322).

Yet another example of a call for critical internationalism in American studies, with a focus on political economy, is Leerom Medovoi’s essay “Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies.” In this essay, Medovoi contends that the move towards transnationalism or postnationalism within American Studies should not be assumed to be automatically progressive:

[T]ransnational American studies should not presume itself to be automatically performing progressive ideological work. In the context of the postwar university’s mediating role between knowledge and politics, the post-national frame in today’s American studies appears to be positioned quite similarly to the national frame of the Cold War era that it displaces. Both frames delineate the imaginary field within which the ideological struggles of their respective historical moments occur. (162)

A central question Medovoi asks is, “[w]hat if we read the re-narratization of American Studies in relation not only to progressive movement projects, but also to the arrival of post-Fordist knowledge imperatives in the American university?” (164). Although the “knowledge

imperatives” in question do not simply “arrive”—they are actually historically and ideologically produced and reproduced in all sorts of ways—I think Medovoi foregrounds an important issue by demonstrating the links between the development of capitalism and the development of American Studies. Using a Gramscian perspective, Medovoi points out that during the Cold War, American Studies emerged as a discipline at the same time as the university itself was being retooled as an ideological state apparatus, and thus the discipline served to bolster the dominant ideology of the cold war. By extension, Medovoi argues, American Studies continues to function as a part of the ideological state apparatus with its turn towards transnationalism, although of course there are some distinctly counter-hegemonic and oppositional moves within the field, ones that are more exceptions than immediately discernible patterns, a point that I have made earlier.

### **Unmasking U.S. Imperialism/Alternative Visions of Globalization**

But another interesting part of Medovoi’s article is the way in which he argues for bringing together American studies and postcolonial studies in the interest of oppositional work. And he insists that the task of American studies scholars should not be to just point out and unmask US imperialism, but to also support alternative visions of globalization. Medovoi writes:

What, then, can such strategic counter-hegemonic work look like for the foreseeable future of American studies? Presumably, it cannot consist simply in unmasking American empire as a means to disrupting the self-aggrandizing American national narrative. Instead, this task will need to be combined with what is now a more urgent one: underwriting alternate global visions so that post-national American studies becomes, not just the intellectual voice of anti-war sentiment in the United States, but also a participant in the attacks on actually existing globalization as waged by anticapitalist and anti-war movements outside the United States. (177)

I commend the ways in which Medovoi brings up the questions of actually-existing globalization as well as actually-existing oppositions and resistances to such globalization, a globalization that—as I have already indicated—is a euphemism for U.S. imperialism itself. In fact, there are activist dimensions that Medovoi emphasizes as aspects of an alternative version of American Studies responsive to an alternative vision of globalization itself. I also like the ways in which he emphasizes both anticapitalist and anti-war movements, although I wish he could emphasize the need for learning from numerous ongoing anticapitalist movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, movements from which one can take cues for theorizing the scope of American studies itself. In fact, as I explain later in this study, my reason for focusing on a country like Bangladesh is not only to elucidate the ways in which U.S. imperialism functions there—of course that is an important aspect—but also to also highlight the counter-hegemonic movements and resistances to global capitalism and U.S. imperialism coming from Bangladesh to broaden the scope of American studies in the era of so-called “globalization.”

As I have already indicated, the term “globalization” is not always politically instructive, while I have also indicated that globalization is actually a euphemism for U.S. imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, one of the topics that must be addressed is U.S. imperialism itself. Several American Studies scholars have made this argument quite cogently. I find three essays by Amy Kaplan, Arif Dirlik, and Lisa Lowe extremely useful in that they underscore the need for American Studies to pay attention to U.S. *imperialism*, not just globalization. I would argue that the term “globalization” is not only a euphemism for imperialism—a point that I already made—but it also tends to obfuscate and obscure the unequal power-relations and production-relations between the “center” and the “periphery,” to invoke the world-systems conceptual pair.<sup>14</sup> First of

all, Amy Kaplan makes the case for how imperialism connects the U.S. to the rest of the world in “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” her introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993). Kaplan provides a reading of Perry Miller’s preface to *Errand into the Wilderness*, asserting that “[t]he field of American Studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo” (3). And Kaplan thus argues that any study of American culture that does not address imperialism is inadequate. She further points out: “Foregrounding imperialism in the study of American cultures shows how putatively domestic conflicts are not simply contained at home but how they both emerge in response to international struggles and spill over national boundaries to be reenacted, challenged, or transformed” (16). Indeed, as I will later elaborate, there is no way we can make sense of the gendered and racialized exploitation of labor-power in American culture without foregrounding and rearticulating the question of imperialism itself.

And Arif Dirlik, in “American Studies in the Time of Empire” (2004), also makes the case for American Studies to address U.S. imperialism. Dirlik argues that American Studies as a field must necessarily become more global in scope because of two factors: “the globalization of the USA as a power and as idea, and the transnationalization of American society” (288). In other words, Dirlik asserts that the national space of the US now stretches across the world and can no longer be drawn within the boundaries of political maps, while at the same time the intensified immigration and migration into the U.S. “worlds” the country from within. In response to Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s much disputed book *Empire* (2000), Dirlik concedes that what is going on at present on a global scale is more than simply classical colonialism or imperialism. But, contra Hardt and Negri, he insists that the nation has not lost its

relevance today.<sup>15</sup> And all of this, he argues, has direct implications for the field of American Studies:

As it is impossible to settle on the boundaries of the USA, it may be equally impossible to define boundaries to an intellectual field called American Studies. American Studies inevitably includes studies outside of the ‘borders’ of the USA, as those borders are ‘arranged around the world’ not just politically or militarily but, with greater structural longevity, in the construction of a new global political economy with its attendant organizational and cultural demands. This expansion of scope may render American Studies imperialistic, but it follows necessarily from the realities of Empire. On the other hand, it obviously brings new burdens to American Studies practitioners, who need to know more about the world that has become the domain of the USA, with its own disciplinary requirements (such as the learning of foreign languages) to understand how others deal with ‘America’, which is the antidote to the imperial implications of a ‘globalized’ American Studies. (291)

Dirlik thus makes the point that a *U.S.-centric* view within American Studies is obviously insufficient for understanding the U.S.’s past or present, and that the field must pay rigorous and continued attention to a dialectic between the imperialist implications and involvements of the U.S. in the world and of the world in the U.S., if American Studies is to remain relevant at this historical conjuncture when the slogan “it isn’t just imperialism, but U.S. imperialism, stupid!” has assumed a material force from Bolivia to Bangladesh.<sup>16</sup> In fact, I recall that when I was teaching in Bangladesh during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, an image of a bumper sticker image circulated through faculty emails that stated: “Be nice to America, or it will bring democracy to YOUR country!”

### **Language and American Studies: What is “Foreign”?**

But let me insert one addendum to Dirlik’s argument. When he speaks of the need for learning foreign languages, I would add that American Studies should also redefine what is considered an “American” as opposed to a “foreign” language. English is the assumed language

of American Studies scholarship—and it is a narrowly and hegemonically conceived “English”—English in the image of the U.S. Not even the idea of so-called nonstandard or other “Englishes” is entertained in American studies in certain parts, not to mention languages other than English. The collection of articles in *Not English Only: Redefining “American” in American Studies* (2001), edited by Orm Øverland, does an excellent job of challenging the “English-only” character of American studies. In his introduction, Øverland points out that “the strange anomaly of combining multicultural theory with monolingual practice has been largely unquestioned in American Studies” (2).

Victor Villanueva and Geneva Smitherman also take up this issue of monolingual practice ironically embracing multiculturalism in their edited collection, *Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice*. In their introduction to the book, Villanueva and Smitherman argue that while there is some “intention” in the academy regarding the diversity of language in the classroom, the practice tends to fall short, and particularly practice that teaches the connections between language, racism, and nationalism. Hence, their collection is an attempt to begin to fill in this gap. In regards to the growing numbers of people of color in college classrooms (as teachers and students), Villanueva and Smitherman write:

We know we want to celebrate their linguistic deftness. Yet we tend to hold to the belief that there is but one tongue that must be mastered if those students before us are to succeed, the standardized American English, the conventions of an universalized Edited American English. It doesn’t sit well, but there it is, we say. (2)

Indeed, as Villanueva and Smitherman argue, the attitude that prevails in the academy is a kind of color-blind racism—a racism that might be expressed in this way: “I’m not racist, but if those kids want to get ahead, they need to learn proper English” (3).

While their focus is on the college classroom, the points Villanueva and Smitherman



make about the exclusionary linguistic practices of the American academy can be applied to the field of American Studies. In other words, American Studies needs to internationalize from without and from within, so to speak—so as to “hear” not only the multilingual voices of the global subaltern located within and outside of the physical national boundaries of the U.S. but also to reconfigure radically the borders of American Studies.<sup>17</sup>

Along similar lines as Villanueva and Smitherman, yet with a slightly different focus, Lisa Lowe also argues for a kind of internationalizing from within in “The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique.” In this article Lowe argues that American Studies should not only internationalize in terms of its engagement with the present, but also with how the past is studied. She observes that racialized immigration has been a longstanding phenomenon in the United States, not just a recent event following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, as it is often depicted. Lowe also traces the history of racialized immigration side by side with the history of American capitalism and imperialism:

[R]acialized immigration is indeed, along with American empire, part of a longer history of the development of modern American capitalism and racialized democracy, a longer, more notorious past in which a nation intersected over and over again with the international contexts of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Korea, or Vietnam. The material legacy of America’s imperial past is borne out in the “return” of immigrants to the imperial center, and whereas the past is never available to us whole and transparent it may often be read in the narratives, cultural practices, and locations of various immigrant formations; these fragmentary, displaced memories of America’s imperialism can be refigured as alternative modes in which immigrants are the survivors of empire, its witnesses, the inhabitants of its borders. (76)

Lowe’s article appears in a relatively recent collection entitled *The Futures of American Studies* (2002). What she has to say about the future of American Studies is that if it is to internationalize, “it may well involve, however delayed, partial, or allegorized, a tireless reckoning with America’s past—its past as empire, its international past” (76). This might be

called, in other words, a kind of “internationalizing historiography.” She exemplifies this reckoning by addressing the historical phenomenon of Asian immigration in particular in various ways: as a racial formation, as an economic sign, and as an epistemological object. Her study is useful because she draws connections between the histories of immigration, capitalism, and imperialism in regards to the United States in order to fashion a new approach in American Studies.

Thus I build on the works already produced by a few scholars to promote a critical internationalism within American Studies. In fact, I intend to use and synthesize insights drawn from these authors, while also exploring other theorists, scholars and activists—including some from the third world and Bangladesh—who are involved to different degrees in the project of internationalizing American studies itself. But what I particularly want to add to the conversation is a renewed attention to feminist political economy as a means for approaching critical internationalism. I elucidate what I mean by feminist political economy in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORY AND METHOD, PART II: FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AND RHETORICAL CRITIQUE AS INROADS TO AMERICAN STUDIES

She is dressed in red  
For red is a very bright colour; it draws attention easily.  
A necklace goes round her neck.  
Her earlobes are pierced, so are the two sides of her nose.  
Metal is worn in the ear and nose  
So that she is illuminated by the sparkle or stone  
since she has only a little sparkle of her own.

She is given bangles to wear on her wrist,  
Almost a handcuff; its shape is similar to a chain.  
She has bangles on her ankles too,  
So that her movement can be traced.  
Her face is painted.  
She is not enough, not complete without some colouring.

A human being is transformed into a market product in this way.

—Taslima Nasreen, from “The Wheel”

In the previous chapter, I explained my rationale for a “critical internationalism” within American Studies. Now let me explain my rationale for using the tools of feminist political economy and rhetorical critique in American studies. To begin with, I will discuss feminist political economy. But before I dwell on feminist political economy in its general and specific configurations, I should first define political economy on a basic level. Political economy is neither mainstream political science nor mainstream economics. Charles Sackrey, Geoffrey Schneider, and Janet Knoedler, in *Introduction to Political Economy* (2008),<sup>1</sup> offer a lucid discussion of the difference between mainstream economics and political economy, as do Tom

Riddell, Jean Shackelford, and Steve Stamos in *Economics: A Tool for Critically Understanding Society* (1998). For instance, Riddell, Shackelford, and Stamos define political economy—as opposed to mainstream economics—thus:

Political economy...is more concerned [than mainstream economics] with the relationships of the economic system and its institutions to the rest of society and social development. It is sensitive to the influence of non-economic factors such as political and social institutions, morality, and ideology in determining economic events. It thus has a *much broader focus* than [mainstream] economics. (qtd. in Sackrey, Schneider & Knoedler, 3-4, emphasis added).

This is the basic definition of political economy which I both use and stretch in my study. In fact, in the following chapters, I will employ the tools of political economy in a number of ways, relating it to a variety of non-economic factors in the U.S., in Bangladesh, and on a global scale.

Sackrey, Schneider and Knoedler also point out some major differences between mainstream economics and political economy. They argue that while there are important distinctions among those who work in the tradition of political economy, the following critical points are agreed upon:

1. Although most mainstream economists claim that they are doing “economic science,” their work all too often fails to explain and predict actual events in the real world—an essential test of any scientific work.
2. A principal reason for this inability to explain real events is the restrictive assumption of “economic man” in mainstream economics, along with a parallel assumption that human beings by nature have unlimited wants for consumer goods.
3. Mainstream models are typically not presented in the historical context that shapes all human events. Furthermore, most mainstream economists have not studied the history of economic ideas, and thus are unaware that the principal assumptions of their analyses have been challenged by political economists for over two centuries.
4. Mainstream economists typically presume a separation between economic activity and political power. (*Introduction to Political Economy* 4)

Sackrey, Schneider, and Knoedler ground this explanation in historical analysis, pointing to the ways in which mainstream economists have adopted some version of the scientific method, and

have “tried to design regular, law-like models for social phenomena” (5). For instance, they discuss the ways in which economists have historically borrowed concepts from the sciences:

[D]uring the nineteenth century, economists borrowed the idea of “equilibrium” from physics. In doing so, economists made an extraordinary leap of faith about their ability to study and predict human activity. When social theorists use the idea of equilibrium in model building, they are implying that patterns of human life in a fundamental way are analogous to, say, the equilibrating balance of forces in our solar system that keeps Mars from ramming us head on. That is, this idea presumes that the economy is typically *stable*, and when buffeted away from stability, will always return on its own. A critical implication here is that, if the economy is assumed to be stable and self-correcting, it is better to allow it to function on its own, without extensive government interference. Equilibrating systems, whether among the planets or in people’s activity, suggested to Adam Smith and to many economists after him, that they were “natural,” and this meant they were “God’s work.” (Sackrey, Schneider & Knoedler 5-6)

This understanding of economics as a science of “equilibrium” remains at the heart of mainstream economics today. I recall learning a simplified version of the law of supply and demand in my economics class in high school, as if it were the law of gravity itself, one which strikes a natural equilibrium between capitalists, products, and consumers. What Sackrey, Schneider, and Knoedler and other political economists argue is that economics simply cannot be understood as a science abstracted from its context—it must be understood in its real-world relationships with the political, the social, and the cultural, although Sackrey, Schneider and Knoedler have fallen short of enacting any rigorous dialectic between economy and culture as such.

### **Political Economy in American Studies**

I would argue that political economy as a methodology has been marginalized, if not completely ignored, in American Studies. Of course, attempts have been made here and there to incorporate political economy into the field. But, in general, because of the influences of

poststructuralist and other post-marked theories, a great deal of American Studies tends to isolate the cultural from the economic. But to dissociate the cultural from the economic is to erase the connections between culture and the production, circulation, distribution, and consumption of cultures within the global capitalist economy. Indeed, “production,” “circulation,” “distribution,” and “consumption” are the four categories which both Marx and Engels have identified as the fundamental categories of political economy, particularly with a focus on production and exchange. In fact, one of the most basic definitions of political economy has come from none other than Engels himself:

Political economy, in the widest sense, is the science of laws governing the production and exchange of the material means of subsistence in human society. Production and exchange are two different functions. [...] But [...] they always determine and influence each other to such an extent that they might be termed the abscissa and ordinate of the economic curve. [...] Political economy is therefore essentially a historical science. It deals with the material which is historical, that is, constantly changing. (“Political Economy” 163)

In other words, according to Engels, the scope of political economy certainly includes, among other things, the material means of subsistence in human society. I argue that these material means do not only include the economic means as such, but the noneconomic means as well. Moreover, political economy, as Engels suggests, deals with historical material with a focus on how such material keeps changing. In this study, I stretch this Engelsian definition of political economy, while orienting it in the direction of the gendered means of production—both economic and cultural.

But, of course, I am not the only one in American Studies who has advocated the need for doing political economy in American studies as such. Before I articulate what I mean by feminist political economy in particular, let me quickly rehearse some of the high points of works that

have used and applied political economy within American studies.

In many ways, Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (mark the instructive subtitle here) is a crucial text for me in American Studies, in terms of understanding the relationship between cultural production and political economy. Denning discusses a wide variety of cultural productions of the 1930s, including literature (particularly proletarian literature), poetry, music, cartoons, and he highlights the connections between political movements and cultural productions. In essence, he defines the relationship between discourse and the material conditions in quite concrete ways. In chapter twelve, for instance, "American Culture and Socialist Theory," Denning outlines the ways in which socialist theory entered American cultural politics in the 1930s, and the various forms and shapes it took. In terms of enacting a dialectic between culture and political economy, Denning, in fact, reminds us of Antonio Gramsci, who was—despite his focus on the superstructure—keenly attentive to the question of political economy, although Gramsci was not a political economist in the traditional sense of the term.

Let me mention again the work of Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez who have not only been interested in internationalizing American studies, but have also used the tools of political economy in the domain of American Studies. In "Towards a Political Economy of 'American Studies': Reports from an Experiment-in-Progress" they describe their experiences in co-directing the International Forum for U.S. Studies at the University of Iowa from 1995-1999, and the conversations that have come out of the forum. Although they do not go into great theoretical detail, they do provide some useful general reflections prompted by the forum on how political economy might be useful to the field of American Studies as a whole:

How, we asked, could we understand the production of knowledge about the U.S. while taking into account the institutional and ideological conditions of its creation and circulation – in other words, what would a global “political economy” of “American Studies” look like? [...] [O]ne object of analysis for a transnational American Studies scholarly community might be to track the flows of *knowledge* about the U.S., the different issues, ideas, and paradigms that generate that knowledge in specific sites (inside and outside the U.S.), and the use-value of that knowledge both to the scholarly communities that produce it and to scholars located in other places. [...] [T]aken together all of these practices 1. form a political economy which constitutes “American Studies” in the broadest sense, and 2. define the contours of the U.S. nation as an “imagined community” and “Americanism” as a cultural concept. (212, 215)

I think it is significant—from the perspectives of political economy—to examine the logics of knowledge-production, knowledge-circulation, knowledge-distribution, and knowledge-consumption of the U.S. But this is not enough. Desmond’s and Domínguez’s project seems to over-valorize the discursive, sometimes at the expense of the material. When I envision a politico-economic methodology in American studies, I think that it must not only be confined to knowledge-production, but it is important to account for that knowledge-production in terms of its relationship to the exploitation of labor-power on a global scale. In other words, I raise such questions relating to knowledge as these: Whose knowledge is it, anyway? What does this knowledge do? For whom? How is this knowledge related to the system of the international division of labor? Or how does knowledge itself turn out to be the site of the class struggle, and a site of gender and race struggles?

While I tend to be critical of the fetishization of discourse here, let me make clear, however, that I do not dismiss discursive practices summarily, as some—in the name of Marxism—have done. I agree with Chela Sandoval, who contends in *Methodology of the Oppressed* that there is a space for “oppositional consciousness” (10) within different discursive domains. And I commend her attempt in this book to cross what she calls “the stubborn apartheid



of theoretical domains” (11), which include critical and cultural theory, U.S. Third World feminism, feminist theory, de-colonial theory, queer theory, and film and television theory. Out of the crossing of these theories, she devises what she calls a “methodology of emancipation” (2) which is comprised of five skills: semiotics, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, democratics, and differential consciousness. I think her emancipatory project of de-colonial struggles marked by “oppositional consciousness” is an extremely useful one.<sup>2</sup>

Although Sandoval engages a number of Marxist and Marxist-feminist texts and theorists, bringing them into interesting conversations with one another, her famous five methodologies obviously exclude political economy as a possible methodology of the oppressed.<sup>3</sup> But for many third-world Marxist feminists—as well as for many of the U.S. third-world feminists she herself discusses—political economy remains not only a methodology, but a site of life-and-death struggle. Sandoval’s lack of attention to the tools of political economy has to do with her relative lack of engagement with Marxist feminists outside the borders of the U.S. As I combine feminist political economy with a critical internationalism, this study certainly draws on the works of some third-world Marxist feminists, among others.

### **Defining Feminist Political Economy**

Let me now turn to a more full description of what I mean by feminist political economy. While definitions may run the risk of simplifying complex concepts, they are still necessary and useful tools to “name the nameless so it can be thought,” to borrow the expression from the black-lesbian-feminist-warrior-poet Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider* 37). Feminist political economy is an interdisciplinary area of investigation and interrogation—in fact, I take it as an

interventionist and interrogative area of study—which, on a very basic level, studies how systems of economic relations and gender relations originate, develop, function, and change, while mutually imbricating and implicating one another. Or to put it another way, and even more simply: feminist political economy critically examines or demystifies the complex connections between such overdetermined structures of production-relations and power-relations as capitalism and patriarchy, and thus stretches Marxist theory to account for the domestic, local, national, and international exploitation of gendered labor-power. As Azizah Al-Hibri puts it—and this is the title of her article—“Capitalism is an Advanced Stage of Patriarchy, but Marxism is Not Feminism.” Heidi Hartman also famously discusses the troubled relationship between Marxism and feminism in her essay “The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union”:

We try to use the strengths of both Marxism and feminism to make suggestions both about the development of capitalist societies and about the present situation of women. We attempt to use marxist methodology to analyze feminist objectives, correcting the imbalance in recent socialist feminist work, and suggesting a more complete analysis of our present socioeconomic formation. We argue that a materialist analysis demonstrates that patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure. We suggest that our society can best be understood once it is recognized that it is organized both in capitalistic and in patriarchal ways. While pointing out tensions between patriarchal and capitalist interests, we argue that the accumulation of capital both accommodates itself to patriarchal social structure and helps to perpetuate it. We suggest in this context that sexist ideology has assumed a peculiarly capitalist form in the present, illustrating one way that patriarchal relations tend to bolster capitalism. We argue, in short, that a partnership of patriarchy and capitalism has evolved. (206-207)

Feminist political economy has thus developed as a response to the political economy of orthodox Marxism—amidst, of course, the real world of the capitalist exploitation of labor—that assumes the exploited proletariat is male and thus excludes women’s labor-power, including unpaid domestic labor-power. I draw from feminist political economists who have creatively

applied the Marxist framework.

### Early Marxist Feminists

Early Marxist feminists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai, and Clara Zetkin—by raising and addressing some crucial questions relating to women in some ways—laid the groundwork for feminist political economy around the turn of the twentieth century. Let's look first at the case of Rosa Luxemburg. Although Luxemburg's major politico-economic work, *The Accumulation of Capital*, is a response to and extension of Marx's theory of the expanded reproduction of global capitalism, as enunciated in *Capital, Vol. II*, it is the later Luxemburg who brings up the women's question as a primary one under capitalism itself, a system that reproduces itself by increasingly exploiting women's labor-power at many levels. Lis Mandl writes in a relatively recent essay, "Rosa Luxemburg and the women's question—'Marxism in her bloodstream'":

This article mainly deals with the women's question and some readers may ask why we should refer to Rosa Luxemburg in dealing with this question, since she never was connected to the women's question in the same way, as for example Alexandra Kollontai or Clara Zetkin. She wrote only a few articles about the women's question, especially on women's right to vote. But that doesn't necessarily mean she wasn't interested in or she wasn't thinking about the women's question only as a secondary contradiction. The opposite is true. In November 1918 she wrote a letter to Zetkin saying: "Maybe I should write on the women's question. It's so important right now, and we don't have any comrades here who understand something about it." (par. 3)

But what is Rosa Luxemburg's actual position vis-à-vis women? To answer this question quickly: the emancipation of women is *never* possible under capitalism, but only possible if there is socialism that makes the women's question central to the class struggle.<sup>4</sup>

Alexandra Kollontai—who was, of course, involved in the socialist movement in Russia

as well as in women's movements—argued that socialists must be thoroughly attentive, theoretically and practically, to the questions of sexuality and gender right from the beginning. In *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, Kollontai identifies the ways in which the societal norms about sexuality are nothing but an extension of bourgeois conceptions of property-rights.

Clara Zetkin, who held a series of interviews with Lenin himself on the woman question, also directly and even militantly takes up the question of women under capitalism within a Leninist framework, while also extending that framework to deal with the women's question under both capitalism and socialism.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in 1896, she gave a speech at the party congress in Gotha in which she formulated some of the main points of her theory regarding women's emancipation:

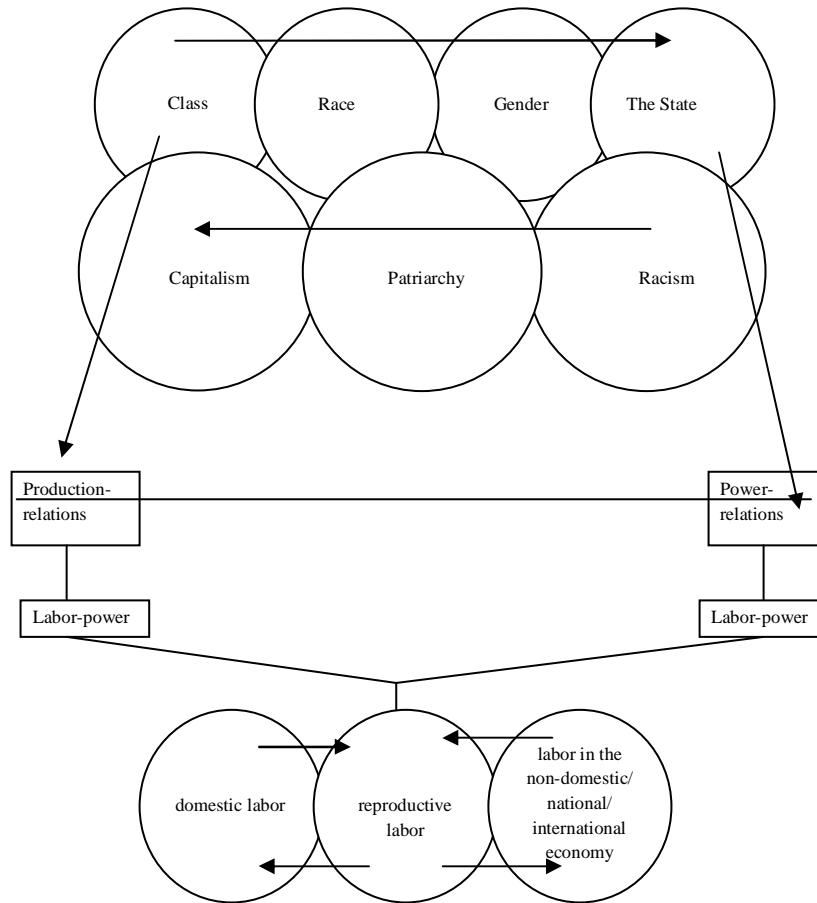
1. The struggle for women's emancipation is identical with the struggle of the proletariat against capitalism.
2. Nevertheless, working women need special protection at their place of work.
3. Improvements in the conditions of working women will enable them to participate more actively in the revolutionary struggle of the whole class. (qtd. in Mies, *Search for a New Vision* 67)

But of course, this trio—a powerful one at that—cannot be considered political economists in the strict sense of the term, yet the conjunctural and important questions that they raised, in fact, continue to prompt us to examine the complex and multifaceted relationships between patriarchy and capitalism—an area very relevant to feminist political economy.

Later “Marxist feminists,” “socialist feminists,” and “materialist feminists”—as they have variously identified themselves—especially from the 1970s onward have significantly expanded the terrain of feminist political economy. Drawing on their works, while also deriving inspiration from the interventions of the early Marxist feminists mentioned above, for the sake of

conceptual convenience, I offer below a tentative and provisional diagram of certain nodes, connections, thematic trajectories, and units of analysis that characterize what I have already called a feminist political economy:

**Diagram III: Some Nodes of Feminist Political Economy**



**Capitalism, Patriarchy and Racism: Rethinking the Relationships**

I should register a caveat that feminist political economy does not just routinely explore the relationship between class, gender and race. In fact, my goal in this study is to work towards a reconfiguration of the Marxist notion of “class” in terms of how class is racialized and

gendered in the context of “globalization,” which I have already characterized as a euphemism for the latest stage of capitalist imperialism. I should also point out that in American Studies and the humanities in general, the category of “class” has lost much of its meaning in terms of the social relations of labor and has instead become “classism.” Indeed, the race-class-gender triad has become a watered-down cultural-studies trope devoid of a systemic analysis of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. So one aspect of this project is to rethink the very category of class and its relationship to racism and patriarchy. Joan Acker makes a similar argument in “Revisiting Class: Thinking from Gender, Race, and Organizations,” positing that we need to expand the realm of economics within industrial societies when we take gender and race into consideration:

Taking the perspective of housewives, many single mothers, the elderly poor, the chronically ill, or the unemployed reveals that relations of distribution other than wages, salaries, and profits are essential to survival in industrial societies and thus can be seen as economic and as components of class structuring (Acker 1988). While distribution through wages, profit, interest and rent, the components of distribution in Karl Marx’s writing, are all important, distribution through marriage and other family relationships and through the welfare state are essential economic transfers, and most of these are patterned along lines of gender and race as well as class. Thus private life becomes enmeshed in the processes constructing the gender and race contours of class. (20-21)

I think Acker makes some very important observations as to how the racialized and gendered “private” sphere is an element of political economy and thus of class structuring. But her argument is limited to the first world context and lacks an analysis of how “imperialist capitalism”—to use Ellen Meiksins Wood’s term—has transformed class relations. Indeed, Ellen Meiksins Wood’s insights in *Empire of Capital* fill in this gap to some extent, while dealing with the social relations outside of the economic sphere, or what she calls the “extra-economic.” She writes:

To understand the new imperialism [...] requires us to understand the specificities of capitalist power and the nature of the relation between economic and ‘extra-economic’

force in capitalism. It will be argued in what follows that capitalism is unique in its capacity to detach economic from extra-economic power, and that this, among other things, implies that the economic power of capital can reach far beyond the grasp of any existing, or conceivable, political and military power. At the same time, capital's economic power cannot exist without the support of extra-economic force; and extra-economic force is today, as before, primarily supplied by the state. (5)

Indeed, the relationship between the state and capitalism is a crucial one, particularly in terms of how both patriarchy and racism facilitate this connection. I draw insights here from works such as *Gender and Nation* by Nira Yuval-Davis; *Feminism, Political Economy and the State: Contested Terrain*, edited by Pat Armstrong and M. Patricia Connelly, and *The Racial State* by David Theo Goldberg. These works variously demonstrate how the nation-state itself is simultaneously gendered and racialized. Yuval-Davis, for instance, takes up the question of what she calls “nationed gender and gendered nations” (21), particularly exploring the issues of women and the biological reproduction of the nation, cultural reproduction and gender relations, citizenship and difference, the politics of women's empowerment, and gendered militaries and wars. In regards to the last issue in the list—gendered militaries and wars—the Pakistani army's use of brutal, systematic rape of Bengali women as a weapon of war against Bangladesh's independence in 1971 is an example of this, an issue to which I will return in the next chapter.

And in *Feminism, Political Economy and the State: Contested Terrain*, Pat Armstrong and M. Patricia Connelly make the observation that “[a]lthough feminist political economists identify capitalism, the state and patriarchal relations as driving forces in women's subordination, feminist struggles have been fought more in relation to the state than in relation to either corporate capital or male-dominated structures and patriarchal ideas more generally” (3). Armstrong and Connelly argue that feminist struggles have focused primarily on the nation-

state—particularly in Canada, where their study is based—because women have had some success in making changes at the level of the state, while the state also very clearly makes a difference (for good or bad) through public services regulations of the private sector (such as maternity leave provisions and sexual assault legislation).

Thus the question of the state remains quite distinct and pronounced. It is this question of the state that Goldberg further takes up in *The Racial State*. In fact, Goldberg primarily focuses on the ways in which the state is racialized, but he also draws some crucial connections between race and gender thus:

The racial state trades on gendered determinations, reproducing its racial configurations in gendered terms and its gendered forms racially. Bodies are governed, colonially and postcolonially, through their constitutive positioning as racially engendered and in the gendering of their racial configuration. (99)

And I argue that globalization—or imperialist capitalism—has not by any means made the state, rather nation-state, irrelevant. In fact, the U.S. imperialist project continues to gain momentum in the “war against terror” waged in the post-September-11 world by way of keeping nation-states alive. That is to say, this war against terror is the war of one nation-state—imperialist as it is—against other nation-states always-already targeted and racialized. Thus, one of my primary concerns in this study is to stretch feminist political economy to account for the new imperialism—or global capitalism—and racism today.



## **Racism and Global Capitalism: Center-Staging Women of Color**

It is true that certain kinds of feminist political economy show a lack of a rigorous engagement with racism and how it has functioned integrally within global capitalism, U.S. imperialism, and patriarchy in the service of the extreme exploitation of the labor-power of poor women of color from the Third World. I argue that for this reason certain narratives of feminist political economy—particularly fashioned in the West—fall short of a politically adequate and comprehensive methodology when we know, as Audre Lorde puts it, that “most people in this world / are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female / Non-Christian / and do not speak english” (*The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* 23). And consider Delia Aguilar’s argument in her introduction to *Women and Globalization*:

To speak of globalization without center-staging women of color would be a grave mistake. In the era of globalized economics where a race to the bottom is critical for superprofits, it is primarily the labor power of “Third World” women—and unfortunately, of children, 70 percent of whom work as unpaid family members in rural areas (Tabb 2000)—that is the cheapest of all. From the maquiladoras in Mexico even prior to NAFTA, to assembly plants and export processing zones in Central America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Rim, to subcontractors and garment sweatshops in global cities and in nations of the periphery, it is women’s labor that allows and guarantees maximum profitability for the corporate elite, a tiny minority of the world’s inhabitants. (16)

As Aguilar argues, to speak of globalization—or, un-euphemistically, globalized imperialist capitalism—is to speak of women of color in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In fact, the entire anthology *Women and Globalization* is an excellent example of how feminist political economy integralizes, mobilizes and politicizes the questions of race and racism to account for the situations, movements, struggles and resistances of women under today’s global

capitalism. In this anthology, an entire constellation of women's issues and concerns have been foregrounded vis-à-vis the questions of race and racism across the world, making the point that racism itself is not just a local problem, but a decisively global one, integrated and generalized into the structure of the world economy.

For instance, the anthology mentioned above focuses on such issues as women workers in Malaysia and their exploitation under globalization. It also addresses Filipina women's gendered labor-power within and beyond their national borders, the industrial labor of Nicaraguan women in terms of the capitalist privatization of women's industries, and the daily lives of Mexican women with a particular focus on Maquiladoras, which are, of course, gendered and racialized sites of struggles under capitalism. And the anthology pays attention to the role of Haitian women in the informal economic sector, and the impact of Western development models on their lives, the case of "foreign brides" in Taiwan under the internationalization of capital, the racialized nature of the "new world order" affecting women of color globally, the struggles and the exiled predicament of South African women, the cultural debate over female circumcision in the Sudan, as well as the racialized militarization of economic restructuring affecting women along the U.S.-Mexico border and, of course, a discussion of sex workers in the world today. Thus, the essays in this collection all variously demonstrate the crucial importance of race and racism to our understanding of how women live, act, and resist under global capitalism today.

### **The Dialectics of Class, Racism and Patriarchy**

In other words, neither Western feminist perspectives—with their unipolar focus on gender or even class—nor traditional Marxist perspectives alone can adequately address the

dialectics of racism and patriarchy. Linda Y. C. Lim makes this point in her article “Capitalism, Imperialism, and Patriarchy: The Dilemma of Third-World Women Workers in Multinational Factories,” in which she points to “the inadequacy of simplistic anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, or anti-patriarchal analyses and strategies to relieve exploitation” (88). Lim maintains that “capitalism and imperialism only perpetuate and may even reinforce patriarchal relations of production, which in turn reinforce capitalist and imperialist relations of production” (89).

Furthermore, without enacting a gender/race dialectic, one cannot adequately address either the race or the gender question. So when we “center-stage” women of color, an important distinction needs to be made between *racism* and *race*, as the distinction between *sex* and *gender* is drawn in feminist theory. Lisa Saunders and William Darity Jr. argue, for instance, in “Feminist Theory and Racial Economic Inequality” that while race by now has been proven to have no scientific basis, “we cannot ignore race if we are to address the effects of racism” (103).

They also assert:

To be valuable to all women, a feminist examination of inequality of economic opportunity would need to contain a racial analysis. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case in most feminist scholarship in economics. [...] The notion that fighting sexism is part and parcel of fighting oppression against other groups (or at least oppression against the women in those other groups) creates a dilemma for feminists generally and for feminists of color in particular. [...] If the feminist model of exploitation by gender is based solely on the experiences specific to white women, it will be of limited use for addressing the disadvantages accruing to women of color. (111)

And I would add that just as a feminist model of exploitation cannot be based solely on white women’s experiences if it is going to address racism, so also a critical international feminist politico-economic explanation of exploitation cannot only be based on the experiences of women located within the first world if it is going to address global capitalism. Of course, here I am interested in taking “race” not just as a “floating signifier,” but racism itself as an

overdetermined macrostructure of power-relations that are connected in a variety of ways to other structures of domination and exploitation, such as capitalism and patriarchy. In terms of mapping out the relationship between capitalism and racism, for instance, Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* and Melvin Leiman's *The Political Economy of Racism* prove to be instructive.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reproductive Labor**

In fact, I'm interested in redefining the Marxist concept of labor-power by way of drawing on some feminist political economists. A critical tenet of feminist political economy is that the category of reproduction must be placed alongside the category of production to account for women's unpaid domestic labor. But this only gets us so far, as Ellen Mutari and Heather Boushey point out in their introduction to *Gender and Political Economy*:

If the classic feminist critique is that many theories attempt to 'add women and stir,' (Anderson 1988), some early efforts by political economists can be accused of adding *reproduction* and stirring. The domestic labor debate also tended to reify a particular model of gender relations, the male breadwinner and the female homemaker, ignoring historical and cultural variations. (5)

But there are those who have defined domestic labor in more complex ways. Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton, for instance, develop the concept of reproductive labor in their edited collection, *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-liberalism*. They argue that "social reproduction"—rooted in the framework of feminist political economy—"offers a basis for understanding how various institutions (such as the state, the market, the family/household, and the third sector) interact and balance power so that the work involved in the daily and generational production and maintenance of people is completed" (3). What

constitutes reproductive labor has also been defined in complex ways in certain third-world contexts. Maria Mies, for example, has described in *The Lacemakers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* how—for many poor women in India—home labor is not just unpaid reproductive labor, but also paid productive labor that is not just tied to a local economy, but is connected to a global market. Such women, as Mies relates, are hired to do piece-work from home—sewing lace—a system established by multinational corporations which exploits labor-power in the isolation of the home under the guise of “entrepreneurial” work, and thus effectively prevents women from forming a collective or unionizing, or even from comparing wages.

Now let me dwell on another aspect of reproductive labor. I should point out here that the male Marxist tradition for a long time has remained blind to the family as a unit of the operation of global political economy, although Karl Marx and Engels—particularly the Engels of *Origin of the Family*—realized the importance of the family as a politico-economic unit in the mode of production narrative. Marx, in *The German Ideology*, for instance, maintains:

Within the division of labour [. . .] is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. (*Selected* 185)

Such observations notwithstanding, Marx does not adequately theorize gender in his critique of bourgeois political economy. And when it comes to the question of race and racism, both Marx and Engels provide some interesting and instructive clues by way of theorizing the political economy of slavery and colonialism, although such an engagement has not been regarded as adequate by a number of ethnic studies scholars in terms of taking up the questions of race and racism. Indeed, Marx’s observations on gender and race have been contested, extended,

stretched, revised, and variously contextually appropriated by a number of Marxist feminists, of whom Spivak provides one of the most important contemporary examples.<sup>7</sup> In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, for instance, Spivak rewrites the traditional Marxist narrative of political economy and the narrative of the mode of production by inserting into them the gendered subaltern as the source of the production of surplus-value on a global scale. She makes an attempt to “monitor the *differànce* of capitalism and socialism” and to theorize Marxist-feminism in the context of what she calls “the coded discursive management of the new socialization of the reproductive body” (67). To account for this “coded discursive management,” Spivak cites the ways in which various capitalist organizations, including international financial institutions and even NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), variously open up the reproductive body to the processes of exploitation and domination in the interest of the production of capital.

### **The Exploitation of “Sexwork”: The Female Underside of Globalization**

Related to this exploitation is the very exploitation of sexual labor which, itself, is reproductive labor. In *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, the relatively-ignored Italian feminist political economist Leopoldina Fortunati argues that the reproduction of labor includes not only the labor of “houseworkers” but also the labor of “sexworkers.” And while Fortunati’s work remains rather focused on the first world, the categories she discusses can be stretched to account for the third-world contexts where many women are houseworkers, but are taking care of someone else’s children rather than their own, or are sexworkers, and often working as sex-slaves, trapped in a life of prostitution by force. V.

Spike Peterson, for instance, in “Rewriting (Global) Political Economy as Reproductive, Productive, and Virtual (Foucauldian) Economies” makes connections between the sex trade, domestic work, the “maid-trade,” and the industry of the mail-order bride:

Characteristics of the sex trade are closely linked to other burgeoning transnational economies of a “domestic” (private, reproductive) nature that are not deemed illicit: the “maid-trade” and mail order bride industry. Domestic work is understood to be unskilled; it attracts women who need paid work, have little training, may require housing accommodation, and/or seek work where citizenship status is not monitored. [...] Moreover, elite women and those work full time often seek domestic workers to maintain their homes and care for their children. Patterns of migration and the race/ethnic and gender characteristics of who works for whom are shaped by history and contemporary dynamics in the global economy. (14)

In fact, given the dynamics of the global economy and the patterns of migration which Peterson refers to here, the first world/third world divide does not always work neatly, as Sandoval herself puts it in *Methodology of the Oppressed* by mobilizing the term “U.S. third world feminism.” In this era of globalized imperialist capitalism, capital moves labor to sites that are most advantageous for the extraction of surplus value. So while there are distinctions to be made between the first world and the third world, it is not always politically and theoretically useful to speak of a clear divide between, say, workers in the first world versus workers in the third world. To put it simply, there are first worlds in the third world, and there are third worlds in the first: one needs to only look at those enclaves of underdevelopment such as barrios, ghettos, Chinatowns, and reservations, while also, one needs to examine how the national ruling classes in third-world countries operate in close class-alliances with transnational corporations, for instance, to examine what Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild call the “female underside of globalization” (*Global Woman* 3).<sup>8</sup>

Another Marxist feminist scholar who takes up the question of sexuality in her work is Rosemary Hennessy. In *Profit and Pleasure*, Hennessy has done important work to link together feminist political economy and the study of sexuality. She begins by making the basic connections between patriarchy and capitalism explicit—a point I already made in order to characterize feminist political economy itself:

Patriarchy refers to the structuring of social life—labor, state, and consciousness—such that more social resources and value accrue to men as a group at the expense of women as a group. Patriarchy is a historically variant form of social organization that has been necessary to most socio-economic systems in the world and has been fundamental to capitalism’s exploitative human relations. (23)

But Hennessy doesn’t stop with mere connections between these two macro-structures of production-relations and power-relations. She also discusses “heteronormativity”—the norming of heterosexuality—and the ways in which heterosexuality serves as an ideological justification for exploitation. Even the fundamental categories of “man” and “woman” function to uphold capitalist exploitation, as Hennessy argues:

What it means to be a woman or a man, how we name male and female—and even the distinction between them—are sites of struggle because these meanings can and have been used to justify, legitimize, authorize, and explain away the contradictions on which capitalism’s relations of production lie. (*Profit and Pleasure 2*)

In Bangladesh, heteronormativity is exemplified in the treatment of *hijras*—transgendered women—as abnormal, people who are neither men nor women. There is no gender category for them in Bangladesh—they are simply the other.<sup>9</sup> However, as Hennessy further argues, capitalism does not depend on heterosexuality in order to function—it is able to accommodate gay, lesbian, and transgendered sexualities as well as gendered relationships outside of the institution of marriage. Hennessy contends: “in the past few decades, changes in the international sexual division of labor, in marriage law, and in the ideologies of gender suggest that there is no



*necessary* relation between a domestic economy organized in terms of the heterosexual marital contract and capital's drive to accumulate wealth for the few" (*Profit and Pleasure* 65).

### **Women's Labor-Power**

In other words, as my foregoing discussions reveal, the kind of feminist political economy I am interested in enacting here takes class, gender and race as crucial units of analysis that enable us to examine and interrogate critically all kinds of transactions and articulations between capitalism as an overdetermined structure of production-relations as well as patriarchy, racism and imperialism as overdetermined structures of power-relations, which, of course, together bring up the fundamental question of women's labor—rather, labor-power in Marxist terms—and labor-power that is racialized-gendered. In fact, I'm interested in the kind of feminist political economy that nuances, and broadens the horizon of, women's labor-power. As the diagram I used earlier in this chapter suggests, women's labor-power is not just one thing—not just even nameable in one place and space.

Indeed, the specific proletarianization of women under global capitalism resides in the fact that gendered-racialized labor-power is exploited at multiple levels, namely domestic, local, national, and international, while such labor-power gets exploited as 1) domestic labor-power itself; 2) of course, reproductive labor-power (although sometimes distinctions between domestic labor-power and reproductive labor-power cannot be so neatly made insofar as they become part of one another); and—no less significantly—3) labor-power in the non-domestic/national/international economy which, in the patriarchal narratives of political economy, is considered the economy proper. In fact, even a male poet like Roque Dalton—a

Marxist Salvadoran poet and activist—very interestingly captured at least the double-exploitation of women’s labor-power in the space of a poem instructively entitled “On Surplus-value, or How the Boss Robs Each Worker Twice”:

Housework by the woman  
creates time for the man  
to do socially necessary work  
for which he isn’t fully paid  
(the greater part of its value  
the capitalist robs)  
but only enough  
so he can live and go on  
working,  
pay with which  
the man returns to the house  
and says to the woman  
ay, see what you can do  
to stretch it out  
enough to cover all the expenses  
of the housework. (*Poems* 49)

Of course, women’s labor-power—given the advanced stage of capitalism today—has been present in many more spaces than the ones Roque Dalton captures in the poem cited above, a point that I already made. Let us then consider the poem “Tell Us Marx,” by the Indian Bengali feminist poet Mallika Sengupta,<sup>10</sup> which brings up a number of issues relating to feminist political economy, and takes up the question of women’s labor at various levels, while there is a critique of traditional male-centered narratives of Marxian political economy:

She who spun rhymes, wove blankets  
The Dravidian woman who sowed wheat  
In the Aryan man’s fields, reared his kids  
If she isn’t worker, then what is work?

Tell us, Marx, who is a worker who isn’t  
New industrial workers with monthly wages  
Are they the only ones who work?

Slum life is the Industrial Age's gift  
To the worker's housewife  
She draws water, mops floors, cooks food  
After daily grind at night  
She beats her son and weeps  
She too isn't worker?  
Then tell us, Marx, what is work!

Since housework is unpaid labour, will women simply  
Sit at home and cook for the revolutionary  
And comrade he is alone who wields hammer and sickle!  
Such injustice does not become You

If ever there is a revolution  
There will be heaven on earth  
Classless, stateless, in that enlightened world  
Tell us, Marx  
Will women then become the handmaidens of revolution?

The poem raises question about the ways in which the concept of labor-power has been traditionally conceived and posited, not only in the domain of traditional Marxist political economy, but also in our day-to-day life, where, because of patriarchal hegemony, not only men but also women themselves take their work as “naturally” non-economic and unequal to a male-laborer's work in a factory. The poet here questions this hegemonic idea of “economic labor”—a question that guides my own work.

Furthermore, I should emphatically point out that the kind of feminist political economy I'm interested in doing does not posit women as merely multiply-exploited, static groups of people under patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism and racism, but also as active agents of change—ones who continue to struggle and resist, sometimes even extremely exemplarily against those systems of production-relations and power-relations. For me, feminist political economy is not just a field of analysis, but also a weapon for action. Grace Chang puts this very well in her essay “Globalization in Living Color” from the collection *Women and Globalization*

that I have discussed above. Drawing from examples in Malaysia, Egypt, the Philippines, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, the U.S. and Canada, Chang writes: “women of color, as the first victims of globalization, are also the primary leaders in fighting back, in resisting this ‘new world order’” (231).

### **The Rhetoric of Feminist Political Economy and Rhetorical Critique**

Rhetoric. Political Economy. Two terms with pretty much a single claim.  
—Victor Villanueva, “Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric  
(or A Rhetoric of Political Economy)”

In this chapter, I have so far explained my rationale for using the tools of feminist political economy within American studies. Now, let me also explain my rationale for using the tools of rhetorical critique within the framework of feminist political economy. While undertaking a critique of patriarchy and other related structures of domination from the perspectives of feminist political economy, I pay a great deal of attention to the discursive practices of patriarchy and other forms of oppression, and thus deploy what I would like to call a “rhetorical critique.” Put briefly, this idea of rhetorical critique is conceived in the shadow of the idea of “cultural critique”<sup>11</sup>—the kind of critique that examines, interrogates, and demystifies the rhetorics of power and the rhetorics of resistance, while, of course, attending to the rhetorics of political economy themselves.

As I have already explained at some length, by political economy I mean the macrologics and micrologics of the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption not only of commodities, but also of rhetorics and ideologies, all of which are variously interlinked. By a

feminist political economy, as I have already explained, I mean an economy in which such logics are variously gendered and raced, with implications for the international division of labor under capitalism as a mode of patriarchal production, among other things. In other words, a feminist political economy focuses on the dialectical and mutually reinforcing relationships between patriarchy as an overdetermined macro-structure of power-relations and capitalism as an overdetermined macrostructure of production-relations. Our understanding of all such logics and interconnections can be facilitated a great deal by paying attention to how they rhetorically function, producing—on the one hand—the rhetoric of hegemony<sup>12</sup> in the interest of those power-structures, and, on the other hand, prompting the rhetoric of opposition and resistance in the material world. Furthermore, a rhetoric critique of the kind I envisage is likely to show how the production of rhetoric—both hegemonic and counterhegemonic—mediates the links between the human agents and the circumstances in which they act.

In other words, the questions are: Why focus on the rhetorical? Why not stick to the numbers and statistics, which seemingly relate better to political economy? The numbers and statistics are always filtered through the rhetorical, and that is why it is so important to see the relationships between political economy and the rhetorical, between capitalism and the rhetorical, and between imperialism and the rhetorical. Rhetoric is used by the powerful to maintain hegemony—or hegemony itself functions rhetorically insofar as rhetoric involves the process of persuading the self and the other—yet rhetoric can also be used in the service of opposition. In fact, any opposition is rhetorically constituted, among other things, because as one opposes, one also persuades oneself and others that the opposition is necessary and even the most rational thing on earth. Certainly, history itself tells us that any radical change involves a shift in

rhetoric within a given hegemonic bloc, and *vice versa*. In *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, the rhetorician Victor Villanueva makes the following point dialectically; he enacts a dialectic of hegemony and counterhegemony by positing the function of rhetoric thus:

Change is possible, I believe. Language used consciously, a matter of rhetoric, is a principal means—perhaps *the* means—by which change can begin to take place. The rhetorical includes writing, a means of learning, of discovery; it includes literature, the discoveries of others. Rhetoric, after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained. Rhetoric, then, would be the means by which hegemonies could be countered. (121)

Let us now examine what the rhetoric of feminist political economy might look like. In the field of rhetorical studies, a theory of the rhetoric of political economy is still yet to be fleshed out in its entirety, let alone a theory of the rhetoric of feminist political economy. However, a relatively early attempt was made in *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985), in which the economist Deirdre McCloskey fashions her own argument for the usefulness of “wordcraft” (5) (or rhetoric) in the study of economics. Certainly an unconventional economist, McCloskey’s discussion ranges from mainstream economists such as Milton Friedman to the novelists such as Mark Twain and Virginia Woolf. McCloskey maintains: “[t]he point of a rhetorical analysis is merely to read with understanding. [...] What distinguishes good from bad economists, or even old from young economists, is additional sophistication about the rhetoric. It is the ability to read the depth and the surface of the text at the same time, to toggle” (5).

McCloskey’s attempts are significant at a time when economists are fundamentally concerned with numbers and theorems in isolation from their rhetorical implications. In the above passage, as we can see, the emphasis is laid more on the practice of sophisticated reading than on a praxis-oriented analysis. In fact, McCloskey’s basic argument—one that makes sense to me—is that every economic formulation, even when highly mathematical or abstract, is

rhetorically constituted.<sup>13</sup> In other words, she examines the rhetorical character and content of economic ideas and theories, while going to the point of analyzing various tropes and figures of speech that are used in economics. McCloskey has, in fact, been consistently critical of mainstream economics that ignores the rhetorical foundations of the very study of economics itself and, for that matter, knowledges produced outside the realm of economic theory. For instance, in the introduction to *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric*, Deirdre—then Donald<sup>14</sup>—McCloskey and Arjo Klammer make the following observation:

Outsiders are surprised at how far economics has wandered away, since the 1940s, from the human conversation. The main, neoclassical conversation will listen to what is said among a few statisticians and a few electrical engineers; it listens intently to mathematicians, when it can catch their drift, hoping to achieve the Parisian accents of Bourbaki; it listens to the blare of the newspapers, or at least to the financial page. But beyond these there is not much listening going on. Economists are deaf on the job to history or philosophy; most of them yawn at talk of geography or psychology; they do not take seriously the incantations of anthropology or sociology; although they want to speak to law and political science, they do not want to listen. They ignore remoter conversations, as well as their own past. The suggestion that the study of literature or communication or even the nonliterary arts might speak to them would be regarded by many economists as absurd. (4)

But what McCloskey doesn't do, however, is analyze the ways in which the rhetorical serves ideological functions and the hegemonic bloc or how rhetoric turns out to be oppositional in specific historical-material circumstances. In other words, I don't find her rhetorical analysis politically engaged enough.

The scholar who, however, radicalizes and politicizes this field is not an economist as such, but a rhetorician. Victor Villaneuva's attempt to fashion a "political economy of rhetoric" is noteworthy, something that we can stretch in the interest of a feminist political economy. In his essay tellingly titled "Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric (or A Rhetoric of Political Economy)," Villaneuva brings together rhetoric and political economy thus:

Rhetoric [...] is concerned with the whole configuration of power and the economy. When that power is not coercive, then political economy is concerned with the rhetorical and the economic. Both terms—rhetoric and political economy—are architectonic, are overdetermined. (58)

Villanueva continues:

The role of rhetoric, according to Burke, is the demystification of the ideological. The role of political economy is the demystification of relations tied to the economic. If we're to understand where we are and what is happening to us—and maybe even to affect it—we need the tools provided by both. But we think of “economics” as a numbers game. And we humanities types tend to fear numbers. But we might fear a little less if we come to regard economics as yet another instance of the rhetorical. (58)

Here, Villanueva speaks of the same kind of domain-bound thinking within the humanities that

McClosky is critical of within economics: the number folks fear the humanities, and the

humanities folks fear numbers, for the most part, although there are some notable exceptions.<sup>15</sup>

In an attempt to move towards closing this gap, Villanueva draws on theorists such as Manning

Marable, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rosemary Hennessy and V. Spike Peterson, for example, positing that

we cannot address racism or sexism as culture concerns alone; we must examine their

fundamental relationships to political economy.

Feminist political economy is concerned with the whole configuration of power and the economy as they involve the connections between patriarchy as an overdetermined structure of power-relations and capitalism as an overdetermined structure of production-relations. In this study, I make attempts to identify and demystify the consequential rhetoric of patriarchal capitalism and capitalist patriarchy through a rhetorical analysis of capitalist and patriarchal institutions and their discursive practices, while also undertaking a rhetorical analysis of women's oppositional discursive and cultural practices ranging from literary texts to social movements.



But I choose to do a rhetorical critique as opposed the kind of discourse analysis we see within certain areas of postcolonial studies. In fact, I submit that there are certain problems with such discourse analysis. For instance, this kind of discourse analysis largely focuses on the texts themselves—their ambiguities, their semantic plasticities, their equivocations, their plays—while also occasionally focusing on power-relations informing the texts. But this discourse analysis does not show the overdetermined relations between a big picture and the texts themselves, nor does it move in the direction of showing how ideologies themselves function, making us complicit with or resistant to the big picture, with the assumption that that big picture is always misleading. However, the kind of rhetorical critique I undertake does not remain confined to textual analysis or rhetorical analysis as such, but makes connections between the production of rhetoric and the big picture, holding that such a picture—provisional and inadequate, but by no means unnecessary—points up the political and ideological significance of the specific text or rhetorical practice within a given historic bloc.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AGAINST SILENCING THE SITES AND SUBJECTS OF SILENCES:

#### THE CASE OF BANGLADESH

When one nation eats up another, the nation that is swallowed up dies. But the poison enters the blood of the eater. And that poison is in the blood of the Americans.

—Rabindranath Tagore, “The Bloodthirstiness of the Americans”  
(Tr. Azfar Hussain)

Take, for example, the case of Bangladesh. You will hardly ever find an entry from Bangladesh in a course on post-colonial or Third World literature. Stylistically it is non-competitive on the international market. The UN has written it off as the lowest on its list of developing countries, its women at the lowest rung of development. Our students will not know that, as a result of decolonization from the British in 1947, and liberation from West Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh had to go through a double decolonization; that as a result of the appropriation of its language by the primarily Hindu Bengali nationalists in the nineteenth century, and the adherence of upper-class Bangladeshis to Arabic and Urdu, the Bangladeshis have to win back their language inch by inch. [...] [B]ecause of the timing and manner of Bangladesh’s liberation, the country fell into the clutches of the transnational global economy in a way significantly different from both the situation of the Asia-Pacific and the older post-colonial countries. Also, that the worst victim of the play of the multinational pharmaceuticals in the name of population control is the woman’s body; that in the name of development, international monetary organizations are substituting the impersonal and incomprehensible State for the older more recognizable enemies-cum-protectors: the patriarchal family.

—Gayatri Spivak, “Teaching for the Times” (16-17)

Although in the preceding chapter I briefly dwelled on why Bangladesh matters in American Studies, I think I would do well to further theorize, historicize and contextualize the presence of the U.S. in Bangladesh so that we can understand better how U.S. imperialism

functions in a given third-world site, affecting the practices of everyday life in a number of ways. Also, such an attempt would help us understand the nature of people's struggles in Bangladesh—particularly women's struggles—against capitalism and US imperialism, and for that matter, against other macrostructures of domination such as patriarchy and racism, as they are all variously interlinked. I am interested, in fact, in historicizing those events, experiences, and contexts that otherwise get lost in the theater of dominant historical narratives. I derive inspiration from Howard Zinn,<sup>1</sup> in terms of telling stories about the people who are not only victims, but also the agents of change. I also believe that alternative historical knowledge can serve as a weapon in our struggle against oppression, domination, and injustice. The feminist musician Ani DiFranco once put it: “every tool is a weapon, if you hold it right.”<sup>2</sup> I might say that historical knowledge itself serves as a tool. But we need to know how to hold it right. In other words, there is always this question of not just acquiring historical knowledge, but politicizing it.

### **Historical Knowledge as a Tool: Learning How to Hold it Right**

Every tool is a weapon, if you hold it right.  
—Ani DiFranco<sup>3</sup>

That being said, let me make a few observations about the historical struggles of the people of Bangladesh who are, by and large, ignored in the dominant discourses of history. You will not find a single world history book that takes Bangladesh or Bengal very seriously, despite the fact that, historically speaking, it provided the major wealth and resources to British imperialism and capitalism, and currently remains one of the major sources and sites of “cheap”

labor for today's multinational corporations, although this kind of labor is by no means cheap. Such "cheap" labor feeds the monstrous, WalMart-esque commodity-fetishism of the United States, although historical narratives of such labor are predominantly unavailable in the U.S., even within the domain of radical American Studies.

The historical struggles of the people of Bangladesh have been responses not only to the "peripheralization" of the nation itself, but also to the peripheralization of the gendered subaltern in Bangladesh—a country whose political economy is by and large caught up in a debilitating dialectic of development/underdevelopment.<sup>4</sup> It is this very development/underdevelopment dialectic that I intend to discuss at some length subsequently in this chapter.

The current U.S. war on terror in the post-9/11 world has the character and content of a kind of hyper-imperialism or what Marxist theorists like David Harvey, Samir Amin, James Petras, and Henry Veltmeyer have called the "new imperialism" of the twenty-first century. Consider, for instance, what David Harvey has to say in his recent book *The New Imperialism*:

Lurking behind all of this [the U.S.'s numerous recent military interventions across the globe] appears to be a certain geopolitical vision. With the occupation of Iraq and the possible reform of Saudi Arabia and some sort of submission on the part of Syria and Iran to superior American military power and presence, the US will have secured a vital strategic bridgehead [...] on the Eurasian landmass that just happens to be the centre of production of the oil that currently fuels (and will continue to fuel for at least the next fifty years) not only the global economy but also every large military machine that dares to oppose that of the United States. This should ensure the continued global dominance of the US for the next fifty years. (198)

Harvey further talks about the strategic positioning of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, and in countries relatively close to China such as Bangladesh:

If the US can consolidate its alliances with east European countries such as Poland and Bulgaria, and (very problematically) with Turkey, down to Iraq and into a pacified Middle East, then it will have an effective presence that slashes a line through the Eurasian land mass, separating western Europe from Russia and China. The US would then be in a military and geostrategic position to control the whole globe militarily and, through oil, economically. This would appear particularly important with respect to any potential challenge from the European Union or, even more important, China, whose resurgence as an economic and military power and potentiality for leadership in Asia appears as a serious threat to the neo-conservatives. The neo-conservatives are, it seems, committed to nothing short of a plan for total domination of the globe. (198-199)

Indeed, as the world's largest imperialist force, the United States is everywhere, has its presence—direct or indirect—in every country of the world, certainly including Bangladesh. The “poison” in the blood of the Americans that Rabindranath Tagore speaks of—in the epigraph to this chapter—one might safely say, is actually the poison of today's U.S. imperialism that hungers for more places to consume or destroy. And, in its bloodthirstiness, U.S. imperialism has already built nearly seven-hundred military bases around the world. But the same imperialism can apparently be very sugar-coated and certainly keeps playing what Terry Eagleton calls “the Messianic savior” of the world (*After Theory* 224). In the context of Bangladesh, American development agencies such as USAID take on this role of what might be called “imperialism with a smile.”

### **Bangladesh as a Site and a Subject: Contouring the Class-Character of Mainstream Politics**

To make sense of Bangladesh as a site of oppression and opposition in today's globalized world, let me provide certain crucial details about the country itself. The Egyptian political economist Samir Amin already characterized Bangladesh as the “periphery of the periphery”—a

characterization I myself used in the previous chapter. Before we further take up the processes of peripheralization and people's responses, I would do well to provide certain geographical, demographic, political, and geopolitical details about Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is situated in South Asia, on the delta of the two largest rivers in the Indian subcontinent—the Ganges and the Jamuna (or Brahmaputra)—and is bordered by India to the west, Burma (or Myanmar) to the east, and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Like Haiti or Ethiopia, Bangladesh is not only one of the one of the poorest countries in the world—with the majority of the population living on less than \$1 a day—but is also one of the most densely populated. The population stands at approximately 160 million—in other words, more than half the current population of the U.S.—in an area roughly the size of the state of New York (55,598 square miles). The capital city of Dhaka is considered one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with approximately 46,000 people per square kilometer, or the equivalence of a person every other inch.

Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation-state in 1971, after a long struggle for independence. Since then, its political life has been extremely eventful and turbulent, richly replete with people's struggles for democracy and economic independence accompanied by military dictatorships. Badruddin Umar—an uncompromising anti-establishment intellectual and activist, who is hardly quoted in the mainstream research on Bangladesh, let alone World Bank and NGO-funded research—provides a narrative of the emergence of Bangladesh at some length in *Politics and Society in Bangladesh*. Indeed, Umar's narrative has not been part of mainstream bourgeois historiography within and outside Bangladesh, while the tradition of radical historiography within Bangladesh has been initiated by none other than Umar himself—he is

famous for his monumental three-volume history of the language movement called *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon* [The Language Movement of East Bengal], for instance. Umar has, in fact, been characterized as the people's historian of Bangladesh, and some Bangladeshis have even called him "the Howard Zinn of Bangladesh" or—to reverse it—"Howard Zinn is the Badruddin Umar of the U.S." To quote, then, from Umar's *Politics and Society in Bangladesh*:

The new state came into being at the end of a twenty-four year-long struggle against national repression perpetrated upon our people by the successive rulers of Pakistan who represented and promoted the interest of the feudal elements, the compradore bourgeoisie and imperialism. A democratic struggle against national repression may be led either by a party of the working class or that of the bourgeoisie. In East Bengal [today's Bangladesh] the Communist Party had a dominating role in the early period of this struggle through their mass fronts but afterwards its leadership passed on to the petit bourgeoisie and their party, the Awami League. (1)

According to Umar, then, it is the political party called the Awami League that eventually ended up championing the cause of the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistani neocolonial rule. In other words, from the very beginning, the formation of the state was fraught with certain contradictions between the dreams and aspirations of the working-class people and peasants, and the class-based petit-bourgeois agendas of the Awami League. As Umar further writes:

The working class and the peasantry ultimately united under the banner of the Awami League mainly because of the failure of the working class leadership to understand the character, importance and power of the nationalist movement in East Bengal. Owing to this failure they could not direct the nationalist struggle as a form of class struggle and succeeded neither in organising a proper class struggle nor in taking the nationalist struggle forward. Thus the mantle of leadership fell on the Bengali petit bourgeoisie and their political organisation, the Awami League. But capturing political power by the Awami League does not mean that the struggle against national repression has come to an end. (1)

Given the above narrative, it is clear that Bangladesh emerged as a nation-state under the leadership of the petit-bourgeois national ruling class, claiming to represent the hopes and aspirations of the masses that consisted mostly of the working class and the peasantry. While

Umar's narrative underlines the class-character of the leadership that became hegemonic at a given point in history, while also pointing up the class-character of the new nation-state, there is another narrative that speaks of "double-decolonization," to use Spivak's term ("Teaching for the Times" 17), as she applies it specifically to Bangladesh. Let me quote Spivak at some length here:

[A]s a result of decolonization from the British in 1947, and liberation from West Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh had to go through a double decolonization; that as a result of the appropriation of its language by the primarily Hindu Bengali nationalists in the nineteenth century, and the adherence of upper-class Bangladeshis to Arabic and Urdu, the Bangladeshis have to win back their language inch by inch. [...] [B]ecause of the timing and manner of Bangladesh's liberation, the country fell into the clutches of the transnational global economy in a way significantly different from both the situation of the Asia-Pacific and the older post-colonial countries. ("Teaching for the Times" 16-17)

I would argue that Spivak has done a good job of accounting for Bangladesh as a site that is specific and instructive in terms of liberation struggles. Indeed, Bangladeshis first fought against British colonial rulers and then against Pakistani neocolonial rulers, not only through some political protests but also through politically charged massive cultural movements such as the language movement that Bangladeshis carried out with exemplary force in 1952 against the Pakistani neocolonial ruling classes that wanted to rob the majority of the people of their right to speak in Bangla. That language movement also paved the way for the subsequent armed struggle of 1971, leading to the birth of Bangladesh.

### **A Twice-Born Nation: But Whither Women?**

It is not for nothing that Shamsul I. Khan *et al.* remark that Bangladesh is "a twice-born nation" (*Political Culture* 1). As I already indicated, over a period of two decades (1947-1971), East Pakistan—today's Bangladesh, that is—was subject to what has been called "internal



colonialism.” Indeed, as I have hinted, since 1947 a number of mass-movements—including numerous protests and oppositions taking various forms and shapes—eventually paved the way for the liberation war in 1971, which made the emergence of Bangladesh as a distinct nation-state possible. All such movements, including the liberation war, claimed the lives of millions of Bengalis inhabiting the then East Pakistan. Particularly the number of Bengalis killed by the Pakistani army during the 1971 liberation war forms one of the worst genocides in global history. Women were, of course, involved in the war of independence as freedom fighters.

Also, thousands of women were systematically raped at the hands of Pakistani soldiers.<sup>5</sup> In his poem “Nineteen Seventy One,”<sup>6</sup> the Bengali poet Sunil Gangopadhyay writes of one such instance of rape:

O mother, I last saw your daughter Lavanya on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July  
Chased by soldiers, she plunged into the raging waters of the monsoon river  
Hauled up in a net she was struggling to free herself, a captured mermaid  
Then I was chained to a post on the river bank jetty

The animals dragged her away, suddenly Lavanya turned and  
Stared at everyone’s eyes, her look was like thunder  
A chit of a girl got transformed in a moment into a mother-goddess

Even the river was not spared from the curse of the sacred virgin  
Mother, I have looked for your Lavanya everywhere, in the bunkers, in foxholes  
Wherever I have spotted a piece of torn woman’s clothing drenched in blood  
Tell-tale signs of ravished chastity  
Over the hundreds of Ajiur, their white bones pierce the darkness  
Somewhere a hand clawed into earth for support

Those who go they go, those who remain learn to smile  
Rubbing the tears with the back of the left hand  
Flower-thief stealthily enters the grave  
I wake up at midnight  
Children clap in their play and birds start returning to the nest

While the poet paints a moving picture of the violence, I should also point out the ways the poem

paints the tragedy of rape within the context of the girl's virginity: it is her "ravished chastity" that is as much a tragedy as her death. This aestheticization of the death of women who were raped in the liberation war is a common trope, as Nayanika Mookherjee posits in her essay "Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh." Mookherjee asserts that this history of rape has been subsumed and aestheticized by Bangladesh's nationalist project, such that the national history "excludes ambiguities present within the histories of raped women and limits discussions of rape to the collective, the rhetorical, the imaginary" (51). To put it bluntly, it is the dead women—those who were raped and then killed—who can enter the collective history as martyrs for the cause of liberation, not those who have been raped and live to tell the story. Taslima Nasreen tells this story, for instance, of her own aunt:

My aunt's return [from the liberation war] was unwanted. Everyone would have felt relieved if she had never come back. All these years, we boasted about fathers, brothers, uncles taking part in the war; talked proudly of our losses. However, we never uttered a word about my aunt. Today, breaking all taboos, I declare proudly that ten men, full of bestial lust, had raped my aunt continuously for sixteen days, in a dark room in the camp. No one in our society felt proud of my aunt. [...] While the political leaders were making fine speeches about the lost honour of our mothers and sisters, my aunt hanged herself from the ceiling. It was her only way to escape dishonour. (*Selected Columns* 34-35)

For the most part, there is no place in the poems, literature, and history of the liberation war for those women who were raped by the Pakistani army, yet survived. Such women were either shamed into silence or shunned by their husbands, especially if pregnancy resulted from the rape. In *The Year of the Vulture*, Amita Malik describes such a case, for instance:

Another pathetic case is that of a woman of about 25. Her husband was a government officer in a subdivision and she has three children. They first took away the husband, although she cried and pleaded with them. Then they returned him half-dead, after brutal torture. Then another lot of soldiers came in at 8 or 9 A.M. and raped her in front of her

husband and children. They tied up the husband and hit the children when they cried.

Then another lot of soldiers came at 2.30 P.M. and took her away. They kept her in a bunker and used to rape her every night until she became senseless. When she returned after three months, she was pregnant. The villagers were very sympathetic about her but the husband refused to take her back. When the villagers kept on pressing him to take her back, he hanged himself. She is now in an advanced stage of pregnancy and we are doing all that we can do to help her. But she is inconsolable. She keeps on asking, "But why, why did they do it? It would have been better if we had both died. (141-142)

Rape thus had the affect of destroying the lives of women who survived such brutality, long after the war of liberation. As the title of her essay suggests, "Rape as a Weapon of War," Claudia Card describes "martial rape" as a weapon of war itself, and as a form of genocide:

Ultimately, martial rape can undermine national, political, and cultural solidarity, changing the next generation's identity, confusing the loyalties of all victimized survivors. There is more than one way to commit genocide. One way is mass murder, killing individual members of a national, political, or cultural group. Another is to destroy a group's identity by decimating cultural and social bonds. Martial rape does both. Many women and girls are killed when rapists are finished with them. If survivors become pregnant or are known to be rape survivors, cultural, political, and national unity may be thrown into chaos. (8)

Arguing that rape has been used as a weapon of war in numerous contexts, Card compares the rape of Bengali women by Pakistani soliders to the rape of Vietnamese women by U.S. GIs, the rape of Native American women by British soldiers, and the rape of Rwandan women by Hutu soldiers, for instance.

### **Bangladesh, Post-1971: After Independence**

It is obvious that the liberation war meant massive devastation for the newly-established nation-state of Bangladesh, given the genocide, rape and violence perpetrated by the Pakistani army, and given the fact that the war completely depleted the resources of the already poverty-stricken country. The country fell into widespread famine shortly after independence, as I discuss

later in this chapter. Also, national political life was extremely turbulent in the aftermath of Bangladesh's emergence as a nation-state. After Bangladesh was established, the nation went through several phases of military dictatorships and democratic governments. In *Political Culture, Political Parties and the Democratic Transition in Bangladesh*, Shamsul I. Khan, S. Aminul Islam and M. Imdadul Haque recount this history in the following manner:

[Bangladesh] finally emerged as a sovereign nation in 1971 through protracted mass agitation and a war of liberation which claimed millions of lives, but with a great dream for the future. The dream, as one author describes it, soon turned into a nightmare. The nation 'got snarled into a legacy of blood' (Mascarenhas 1986: v). Although it started with the Westminster model of democracy, Bangladesh took little time to turn itself into a single-party regime in 1975. The majestic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brutally killed with most of his family members by some army officers. From 1975 to the fall of [the] Ershad regime in 1990, the country shuttled back and forth between military and civilian rule. During the five years of his rule President Ziaur Rahman faced 20 mutinies and coup attempts; the twenty-first killed him (Mascarenhas 1986). Between 1972 and 1992 the cabinet was reshuffled 97 times (*Bichitra* 19 June 1992). A nine-year long mass agitation led to the fall of the Ershad regime. Through the general elections of 1991 the country was once again on the road to democracy. But the resignation of opposition M.P.s from the Parliament on 28 December, 1994 on the issue of the need for a care-taker government under which the next general elections [were] to be held created a political impasse and a great deal of uncertainty about the future of democracy in Bangladesh. (1)

The above narrative clearly shows the political turbulence and uncertainties only up to 1994. However, the turbulence and tensions did not stop there. In 1996 the general elections were held, and the Awami League came into power with Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister. Then, in 2001, the four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won the majority of the seats in Parliament, and Begum Khaleda Zia—widow of the former President Ziaur Rahman—stepped into power. As the next elections approached in January 2007, the political climate became extremely volatile again. The Awami League announced it would boycott the elections, claiming that the elections were already rigged by the BNP. The Awami League thus organized a series of *hartals* (country-wide shut-downs of workplaces, offices, shops, courts,

schools, and roads).<sup>7</sup> As the heat of the political frictions rose and riots began to break out in various parts of the country—riots that were primarily expressions of petit-bourgeois struggles for grabbing state power—the so-called caretaker government suddenly emerged. It was a handful of the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie who were variously linked to the World Bank and the country’s leading businesses. For instance, the chief of the caretaker government—Fakruddin Ahmed—served as a high official of the World Bank for at least over a decade. The caretaker government did not merely emerge; it imposed itself on the people of Bangladesh in the name of addressing the country’s volatile political situation and in the interest of “democracy.” Thus, without the people’s mandate, the anti-democratic formation of this government ironically emphasized the need for democracy. What is particularly significant is that this very government was continuously backed and even governed by the military throughout, thus making a farce of democracy so that the caretaker government could declare a state of emergency to postpone elections for an indefinite period of time.

At the same time, the interim government imposed a highly-contested “crack-down” on corruption that involved a handful of high-profile arrests. There is no denying the fact that Bangladesh is a site of heavy corruption. Certain efforts were made to arrest certain corrupt political leaders and businessmen who wouldn’t have been arrested otherwise. But it was more exhibitionism (that ended up serving U.S. imperialism) than a genuine campaign on corruption, because this campaign did not question at all the well-known corruption of the multinational corporations operating in Bangladesh, the corruption of the World Bank and the IMF in Bangladesh, the corruption of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the corruption of the military personnel themselves, including the corruption of war-criminals (who were variously

complicit in the genocide in 1971). In other words, given the link between the chief of the caretaker government and the World Bank, and also given the link between the caretaker government itself and the military, while also given the link between the caretaker government and the U.S. itself, the campaign on corruption was not only a selective one, but also a highly class-driven phenomenon only apparently targeting and even arresting some of the rich of the country.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, in the history of Bangladesh, the interventions of U.S. imperialism have been steady, but during the so-called “emergency period” imposed by the military-backed interim government of Bangladesh, such interventions have gone most naked insofar as even the U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh could directly and easily dictate the country’s politicians as well as the interim government. It is highly symptomatic and revealing that during the period between 2007 and 2008, the U.S. ambassador used to throw parties where the country’s bourgeois politicians, including the members of the interim government, all used to gather together to rub shoulders and listen to their “Master’s” voice. Also, during the emergency period, the military-backed, undemocratic interim government of Bangladesh was not at all criticized, but rather heavily commended and, of course, supported by the U.S. government itself.

The pro-U.S.-imperialist, pro-World-Bank, pro-rich, and anti-poor character of the interim government became immediately evident when it launched its eviction campaign, targeting so-called “illegal” slum areas in Dhaka where the landless poor lived in meager shacks and shanties. I was in Dhaka at the time, and personally witnessed how the poor slum-dwellers were brutally evicted in my own neighborhood. While the neighborhood itself was in the rich part of town—Banani—thousands of poor people lived on the outskirts of this neighborhood,

rendering visible the stark class contrast between the rich and the poor. In fact, there is a significant contradiction here: the rich want the poor nearby, so they can be exploited as domestic servants, cooks, cleaners, nannies, and chauffeurs, but then the rich don't want to render their own neighborhood "ugly" with the sights of the housing of the "unclean," "dirty" poor, deemed to be a threat to the aesthetic beauty of the area. In fact, the eviction of slums was part of the "beautification project," while the pretext was also that slums were the sites of criminal activities. Also, the anti-poor character of the interim government manifested itself in its attack on poor vendors in certain areas of Dhaka's working-class neighborhoods, on the ground that these poor vendors—who sold tea, cigarettes, fruit and vegetables, fish, saris, clothing and the like—were "illegally" occupying certain spaces since they had not filled out the proper paperwork that only the colonial-minded national bourgeoisie had access to and tried to legitimize. Because of this campaign, thousands of extremely poor vendors lost their livelihood overnight. Not only that, the poor people who used to buy items from such vendors were also severely economically hurt because they could no longer buy such items at relatively cheap prices. In other words, the poor were at least doubly attacked.

The anti-poor and anti-working class character of the interim government was further exemplified in the ways in which the interim government had launched its program of demolishing certain illegally-constructed tall buildings in the commercial areas. The irony is evident again. Dhaka has by now been internationally known as the city of the homeless. The number of the homeless has been increasing for quite some time now, primarily, if not exclusively, because of the migration of the poor from the rural areas to the urban areas in response to the uneven development of capitalism in Bangladesh. Despite the staggering rate of

homelessness in Bangladesh, the interim government did not hesitate to destroy a number of “illegal” tall buildings which could have been used for sheltering the landless and the homeless. Furthermore, their demolition plans were poorly made, thus costing the lives of poor construction workers when a number of the buildings collapsed in on themselves in the process of demolition.

Following this U.S-backed and military-backed, anti-poor government that reigned supreme from 2007 to 2008, the bourgeois Awami League party took power when elections were again held in 2008, and the Grand Alliance (*Mohajote* in Bangla)—consisting of the Awami League, the former dictator Ershad’s Jatiya party, and a fourteen-party coalition—won the elections, with Sheikh Hasina again holding the position of Prime Minister. During the current period, mainstream bourgeois politics has remained again inattentive to the problems and concerns of the majority of the working-class people and peasantry in Bangladesh. This government again has exhibited its explicit pro-imperialist and pro-corporate moves. This is evident in its recent decision to award gas and oil exploration rights in the Bay of Bengal to international oil companies such as the US-based company ConocoPhillips and the Ireland-based company Tullow Oil plc, with a provision allowing them to export up to 80 percent of the gas reserves in Bangladesh. This decision has been made despite people’s ongoing massive protests, the lineage of which can be traced as far back as the Phulbari movement that began in 2005. In other words, the Awami League government continues its project of plundering its own people’s resources in collaboration with foreign capital. The class-character of this government is obvious again.

I have so far quickly tracked the scenario of the mainstream bourgeois politics that has



been dominant in Bangladesh since 1971. Now, how do we characterize the mainstream political culture prevailing over this period? Azfar Hussain provides a useful narrative of several interconnected trends characterizing this political culture and its class-character thus:

[I]n order to account for the dominant culture in Bangladesh, it is important that we relate it to the very political culture that has emerged in Bangladesh since 1971. As I keep arguing rather repeatedly, it is possible to map out certain distinct patterns and trends that have evolved and taken shape in the domain of what might be called the culture of politics in Bangladesh. Such trends, for instance, include the commercialisation of politics and the politicisation of some form of ‘primitive accumulation;’ the bureaucratisation of politics and the politicisation of the bureaucratic; the militarisation of politics and the politicisation of the military; the politicisation of religion and the communalisation of politics, including of course the pervasive criminalisation of politics itself. And, of course, there have been all kinds of transactions – political and cultural – between our national ruling classes and US imperialism in particular. (“Politics of Culture, Culture of Politics” par. 17)

To speak of Bangladesh as a site of the orchestrated class-alliances between the national ruling classes and U.S. imperialism is to speak of how Bangladesh has been integrated fully into the world capitalist system, as I explain in the following chapter. In other words, Lenin’s definition of imperialism<sup>9</sup> as the highest/latest stage of capitalism remains relevant, although the details of Lenin’s theory of imperialism need stretching and readjustment.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE INTEGRATION OF BANGLADESH INTO THE GLOBAL CAPITALIST SYSTEM; OR, HOW CAPITALISM AND U.S. IMPERIALISM HAVE UNDERDEVELOPED BANGLADESH

Poetry, we do not need you anymore. A world devastated by hunger is too prosaic, The full moon now reminds us of toasted bread.

— Sukanta Bhattacharya<sup>1</sup>

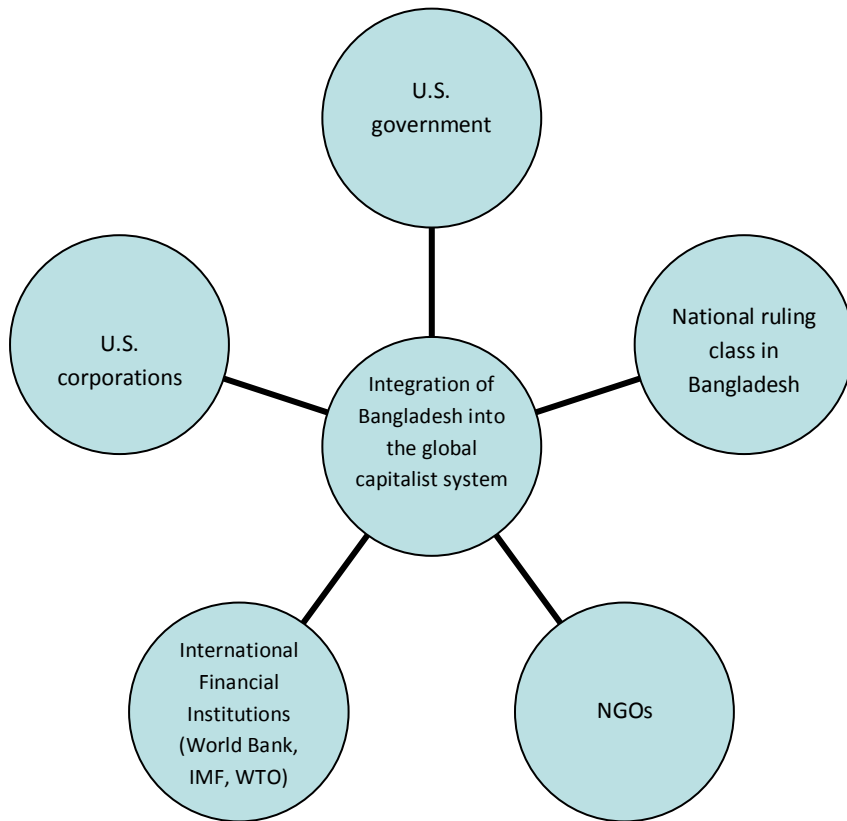
For all the endless, empty chatter about democracy, today the world is run by three of the most secretive institutions in the world: The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, all three of which, in turn, are dominated by the U.S. [...] Nobody elected them. Nobody said they could make decisions on our behalf. A world run by a handful of greedy bankers and C.E.O.'s whom nobody elected can't possibly last.

— Arundhati Roy, *Come September*

#### **Orchestrated Class-Alliances in Bangladesh**

To speak of this integration is to dwell on an orchestrated class-alliance through which capitalism and its logical extension, imperialism, operate and reproduce themselves. This orchestrated class-alliance brings together the U.S. government, U.S. corporations, the national ruling class in Bangladesh, NGOs, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. For the sake of conceptual convenience and subsequent discussions, I want to represent these class alliances diagrammatically here:

#### Diagram IV: Orchestrated Class-Alliance Marking U.S. Imperialism



This model might be juxtaposed with a model that one might advance by way of drawing on Samir Amin’s famous “five monopolies” that characterize today’s imperialist capitalism: 1) technology; 2) financial system; 3) worldwide access to natural resources; 4) media and information systems; and 5) weapons of mass destruction (*Capitalism in the Age of Globalization* 4-5). In other words, today’s capitalism—whatever its crises are—tends to monopolize those five areas in a number of ways across the world. Bangladesh turns out to be a crucial site insofar as some of the areas of monopolies are concerned, particularly natural resources, media and information systems, and certainly the financial system, which also

involves the labor market. In fact, the cheap labor from Bangladesh provides the most lucrative site over which capitalist institutions and multinational corporations want to have their monopolies. As a matter of fact, one cannot think of the integration of Bangladesh into the global capitalist system without accounting for the kind of cheap garment labor that gets exploited in the profit-making drives of multinational corporations such as WalMart.

In fact, my own diagram and part of Samir Amin's diagram relate well to Anu Muhammad's essay "Bangladesh's Integration into Global Capitalist System: A Study on the Policy Direction and the Role of Global Institutions." He begins by saying:

Bangladesh has become more marketized, globalized, and urbanized in the last three decades. Now it has a rising middle class with a good number of very rich people. It also has an increasing number of uprooted poor people. At the same time, we realize the increasing role of international agencies in governance of the state. We also see [the] increasing presence of funding organisations including NGOs. [The] role of the state in major policy formulation seems rather marginal. (113)

According to Anu Muhammad, indeed, global institutions have played very crucial roles in shaping the country's economy and society through even policy-level interventions. Muhammad studies reports, recommendations, strategy papers and prescription documents from various global institutions, particularly from the World Bank, to show how Bangladesh has been integrated into the global capitalist system. Muhammad calls it "a new beginning with [an] old agenda" (113), maintaining that such a process of integration is not a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh. Comparing Bangladesh to other "peripheral economies" under global capitalism, Muhammad suggests that the economy of Bangladesh has been in the process of integration for a long time now. However, during the last few decades—particularly since the mid-1950s—this particular political-economic process of integration gathered momentum with the introduction of foreign aid-based development projects, especially in such areas as agriculture and water

resource management. But after Bangladesh's independence in 1971, there was a massive increase in the inflow of foreign aid. As Muhammad points out:

Soon after independence, the 'Bangladesh aid consortium' was formed with the World Bank as its head 'on the same lines as the Pakistan consortium' (Sobhan, 1982). From a review of thirty years of the bank's suggestions and policy recommendations to the government of Bangladesh, it is clear that the bank has been consistent in its ideological framework. It is interesting to note that the bank always has worked to sell their agenda by keeping the government in good humour, with a supporting tone to the government's political agenda, irrespective of the political philosophies of successive governments (Muhammad, 1996). Such diplomacy proved to be an effective sales management technique in Bangladesh for the global institutions. (114)

Elsewhere, Muhammad, in fact, renames "aid" projects as "Anti-Industrial Development" projects (*Development or Destruction?* 149) insofar as the flow of aid continues to be a trap with all kinds of strings, particularly benefiting foreign capital at the expense of national development initiatives and the development of national industries. In other words, the development of national capitalism is simply undesirable vis-à-vis the monopoly of foreign capital. Thus, global capitalism, indeed, keeps underdeveloping Bangladesh. Underdevelopment itself is the logic of capitalism.

It needs mentioning here that one cannot talk about the integration of Bangladesh into the global capitalist system without taking into account the continuous and massive interventions of the World Bank and other international financial institutions in Bangladesh, variously linked as those interventions are to the US itself. Although the World Bank is notoriously known for its relatively recent structural adjustment policies in third-world countries, including Bangladesh, the role of the World Bank in Bangladesh in particular began much earlier, despite the fact that its Structural Adjustment Program became particularly distinct and dominant in the 1980s. In fact, the Structural Adjustment Program has brought all of the earlier World Bank "reform"

programs together under an integrated project.

It might prove useful at this point to historicize—at least briefly—certain crucial programs initiated in Bangladesh by international institutions that have contributed to the integration of Bangladesh into the world capitalist system. In the 1950s, for instance, programs relating to foreign aid and education, including training programs, as well as the Krug mission and water resource projects, were undertaken by global institutions to facilitate water resource management in Bangladesh, as well as to generate skilled manpower primarily dependent on aid-consultancy. During the 1960s, particularly with support from the World Bank and the U.S., the so-called “Green Revolution” was initiated in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), aimed at the production of mono-crops and the increased marketization of agriculture. During the 1970s, the interventions of the World Bank continued. However, the Poverty Alleviation Program in particular was undertaken by various NGOs in the name of helping the war-ravaged post-independence Bangladesh, the objective, however, being to create new institutions and a civil society compatible with the philosophy of the G7.

The decade of the 1980s is particularly noted for the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) by the World Bank, contributing to the process of deindustrialization and strengthening the authority of the first world—including the U.S.—in Bangladesh. The 1990s marked the period of initiating and materializing the GATT agreement, which opened up certain common property to be privatized by multinational corporations. And the period between 2001 and now has seen the Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan (PRSP), which reinforces the Structural Adjustment Program of the World Bank with tactical flexibility. Anu Muhammad summarizes this whole history of the global institutions thus:

As a whole, the programmes sponsored by global institutions which have played key role[s] in accelerating the process of integrating peripheral economies including Bangladesh with the centre economies include: (i) the ‘Green Revolution,’ (ii) Structural Adjustment Programme, (iii) ‘Poverty Alleviation’ Programmes, (iv) GATT agreement, (v) Foreign ‘aid’ supported trade, technical assistance, reform, consultancy, training and education. The current Poverty Reduction Strategy Plan (PRSP) is the latest in the series. (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 115)

It is evident that in this very history of foreign institutional interventions in the economy of Bangladesh, the roles of the World Bank and the NGOs have continued to remain prominent. This very history also tells us that the participation of the majority of the people—which means the working class and the peasantry in Bangladesh—in the economic life of the country was subordinated to foreign dictates which clearly attest to economic imperialism. As far as the World Bank is concerned, it is quite instructive that it carried out extensive studies on the economy of Bangladesh in the mid 1960s, particularly focusing on agriculture. After Bangladesh’s independence, the findings of these studies were published by the World Bank in a nine-volume study. As Muhammad demonstrates, that study became the working document of the new Bangladeshi government, even informing and influencing the government’s approach to agricultural and water resource issues (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 117). However, as Muhammad further shows, the study was never brought into the field of public discussion, and it was treated as confidential.

### **The World Bank’s Flood Action Plan: Capitalist-Imperialist Interventions**

Since 1971, the World Bank directly or indirectly intervened in the political economy of Bangladesh in a number of contexts, with a number of guidances and directions, including certain programs and policies. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the

entire range of the World Bank's activities in Bangladesh. However, I will focus on a few but symptomatic areas. To begin with, the World Bank's programs have emphasized more intensive use of ground water in Bangladesh and thus has encouraged the introduction and installment of shallow tube wells for safe drinking water for the poor, a project that remained absolutely inadequate in terms of meeting the needs of the poor, while shallow tube wells became a good business for the relatively rich, and kept some local NGOs in Bangladesh going in terms of getting funding from foreign donor agencies.<sup>2</sup> But this shows only a tiny segment of the World Bank's interventions in Bangladesh. To speak of the World Bank interventions in Bangladesh is to speak of its notoriously famous Flood Action Plan.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that Bangladesh is a disaster-prone, climatically vulnerable country that is cyclically visited by natural disasters such as cyclones, drought, and—most often—floods. Because of its location in the delta region of two major rivers—compounded by the “aid” of development in the forms of dams and river embankments—Bangladesh is subject to flooding on an almost yearly basis. And positioned as it is in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is also hit by devastating tropical cyclones, the most devastating of which claimed approximately 500,000 lives in 1970 (the Bhola Cyclone), 138,000 lives in 1991 (the Bangladesh Cyclone), and up to 10,000 lives in 2007 (Cyclone Sidr). If we carefully examine and historicize the interventions of the World Bank in response to Bangladesh's natural disasters, we can easily see how natural disasters are not so “natural”—they are manmade, even produced and reproduced by capitalism itself, aided as it is by the World Bank. As Anu Muhammad points out:

Huge structural measures could not save Bangladesh from another disastrous flood in 1987 and again in 1988. Nevertheless, the water resources programmes were intensified and pursued with more rigor. The World Bank continued to be there. It went for a comprehensive programme to “control flood” and “water management.” In June 1989,



the World Bank “agreed to a request from the government to help in coordinating the international efforts.” (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 122)

Anu Muhammad clearly suggests that the huge structural measures that the World Bank itself adopted earlier simply failed in terms of saving the majority of the people from the ravages of the massive floods occurring in 1987 and 1988. Yet the World Bank stubbornly followed its own measures and continued the project, finally taking up the responsibility of coordinating various efforts made by a number of international agencies and the Bangladesh government to control floods in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the World Bank is not interested in responding—and does not have to respond—to legitimate questions regarding the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan raised by a group of geographers. In “Six Comments on the Bangladesh Flood Action Plan,” James Wescoat and others ask some rhetorical questions that serve the purpose of exposing some of the massive blindspots in the plan itself:

The Bangladesh Flood Action Plan (FAP) was organized by the World Bank and a consortium of governments and technical assistance organizations following catastrophic flooding in 1987 and 1988. The scope of the overall plan, which has 26 components and a time frame of several decades, is broad and ambitious.

But the FAP faces persistent questions about the relative importance and balance of its components. Does the proposed system of embankments threaten the long-term ecological and natural resource productivity of the delta? Will the embankments increase flood hazards in some areas or for some social groups? Have nonstructural approaches been adequately conceived, supported, and integrated into the plan? Will social costs and benefits be equitably distributed? Does the plan expand the participation and range of choice for those at risk? (Wescoat, et al. 287)

The nature of this coordinated flood action plan has also been theorized relatively instructively by Gayatri Spivak herself, in her recent book *Other Asias*. Spivak discusses the European Conference on the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh that was held in 1993 by the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Spivak writes of the donor countries that participated in

garnering a 10.1 billion dollar IMF loan to Bangladesh as part of the Flood Action Plan, arguing that in this instance, “the name of giving is scientifically appropriated for coercive lending, solicited by comprador capital and a compromised State, used as staging props for a nation seeking alms” (*Other Asias* 83). Spivak asks: “Is responsibility to be produced by a debt trap? This monstrosity—a bonded donation—mortgages the future of that country” (83). And Spivak further describes the effect of this Flood Action Plan:

The World Bank coordinates the effort [of the Flood Action Plan], shored up by innumerable business enterprises and consultancies and government allocations and international agencies. The country [Bangladesh] is “consultantized,” the possibility of agitation for peoples’ rights effectively blocked, since the de facto law is in the hands of the donors via a Flood Protection Coordinating Organization set up by executive decision of the Ministry of Water Development, which describes itself as an ad hoc staff body, directed by the “donors’” own policy requirements. There is, in other words, no accountability here. It is not conceivable that some First World consulting agency will, first, be tracked down after the Organization has been dismantled; and, second, respond to the subaltern’s call. (83-84)

In other words, Bangladesh—already integrated into the world capitalist system—has its sovereignty and security mortgaged, so to speak, to the World Bank itself through the mediation of the Bangladesh government representing the interests of the national ruling class and business folks. The class alliances here are unmistakable; they, in fact, point to the ways in which class struggles in Bangladesh operate under capitalism. Spivak also speaks of the country being “consultantized,” an important point that Anu Muhammad himself repeatedly makes in a number of his works, including his crucial and influential essay I’m discussing here. This process of “consultantization” obviously corresponds to and is tied to the logics of the ongoing integration of Bangladesh into the world capitalist system through the World Bank itself, insofar as it has always played a crucial role in shaping and influencing not only the policies and agendas of

donor agencies, including consultants, but also the policies of the Bangladesh government itself.

Another aspect of the World Bank's intervention vis-à-vis the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh is a particular tendency that the World Bank has routinely exhibited: it always advocates—in the name of structural solutions—initiatives and interventions that involve huge costs. As Anu Muhammad again asserts, “[e]xpensive projects have always been preferred, probably because expensive projects ensure a good fortune to the local-foreign parties involved” (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 123). Also, the majority of the people continue to remain on the margin of all such efforts and projects, while of course continuing to remain the worst victims of so-called “natural” disasters. Since the Flood Action Plan was resisted by the people themselves because it simply didn’t work for them and because it was also heavily critiqued by some oppositional intellectuals in Bangladesh, it was abandoned, only for tactical reasons. In 1992 it was replaced, however, by the Water Resources Planning Organization (WARPO), an agency of the Bangladesh government that not only remains tied to the World Bank, but has basically reproduced the program of the Flood Action Plan.

It should be pointed out here that water is simultaneously a problem and a resource in Bangladesh. While, on the one hand, its abundance causes flooding, which brings disaster to the majority of the people (the working class and the peasantry, in particular); on the other, water provides a lucrative resource for profit by the national bourgeoisie as well as foreign direct investment, an issue I’ll take up later. Meanwhile, let me focus on a few more areas in which the World Bank has intervened in Bangladesh. Of course, apart from water resource management, the World Bank has other economic agendas and reform measures. In 1996, for instance, the World Bank dictated to the newly-elected government an agenda for action bent on privatizing

public enterprises, while ensuring increasing intervening power from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF in particular. It was also opposed to the development of national industries, while it recommended an increase in the price of public utilities. The bank's agenda, at that point, was multifaceted, and included an accelerated privatization of state enterprises (such as the privatization of the Nationalized Commercial Bank and power generation plants, as well as the privatization of the Bangladesh Telephone and Telegraph Board), an increase in the price of fertilizer, and a restructuring of the Power Development Board and of the natural gas sector.

### **Consequences of Privatization and Foreign Direct Investment in Bangladesh**

In other words, the integration of Bangladesh into the world capitalist system has to do with the privatization of Bangladesh's common property, facilities, and natural resources, let alone cheap labor. In fact, privatization resulting in the closing down of most of Bangladesh's public enterprises has always been an integral part of all projects undertaken or supported by the World Bank, the IMF, and the ADB (Asian Development Bank). One needs to look at a few other areas to see the point I'm making: the shrimp cultivation project, the jute sector reform project, and the health services project, three key areas in which privatization efforts have been promoted with a vengeance at the expense of the working-class people and the peasants of Bangladesh. As far as Bangladesh's major export cash crop jute is concerned, the major jute industry—along with numerous industries—have also been closed down under the recommendations of the World Bank, because they were thought to be the “losing concerns” for the so-called economic development of the country. As Shahzad Uddin relates in “Privatization

in Bangladesh: The Emergence of ‘Family Capitalism,’”

The BNP government formulated the Industrial Policy 1991, advocating further private sector development. The government, advised and financed by the World Bank, paved the way for wholesale privatization by promoting an ‘Enabling Environment’ which included liberalizing foreign trade, relaxing exchange controls, and restructuring import tariffs. As part of the preparations for privatization, in 1991 the Asian Development Bank, a sister organization of the World Bank, financed the Bangladesh government’s public sector redundancy programme, which was called ‘Improvement of Labour Productivity in the Public Sector Enterprises’—or, in common parlance, the ‘Golden Handshake Programme.’ Under this programme, a huge number of workers were laid off from selected public sector enterprises to enable the enterprises to be sold privately with less worker resistance. (159-160)

In its own 1997 report, the World Bank explains its program for closing down jute mills thus:

“(i) closing 9 of the 29 public mills and downsizing two large public mills; (ii) retrenchment of about 20,000 employees in the public sector; and (iii) privatization of at least 18 of the remaining 20 public mills” (*Bangladesh: Jute Sector Adjustment* 222). In the most recent jute mill closure, in 2003, approximately 23,000 workers lost their jobs when Adamji Jute Mills (the largest jute mill in Bangladesh) was closed down.<sup>4</sup>

All of this would seem to work rather decisively against the stabilizing of the Bangladesh economy. But this is not really the goal of the World Bank. What all of these closures and job losses mean—at least from the perspective of the World Bank—is that Bangladesh should not have its own set of national, self-sustaining industries, but should remain open to and dependent on foreign direct investment through privatization, a process extremely favored by the World Bank by and large in third-world countries, particularly in Bangladesh. But such privatization and closing down of the mills and factories simultaneously most adversely affect the working-class people in Bangladesh. It is not for nothing that the Bengali feminist writer and novelist Selina Hossain said in a national television interview, “every move that the World Bank makes

in Bangladesh is a classic case of class-motivated action that spells out horror to the working-class people, to the poor, in particular.”<sup>5</sup> Development for the World Bank means the development of the rich, the few privileged—nationally and internationally—and the underdevelopment of the many, the poor. In fact, the paradox “development is underdevelopment”—underlying the debilitatingly dialectical logic of capitalism—is most applicable to the ways in which the World Bank has turned Bangladesh into a political-economic guinea pig, a condition facilitated by the national ruling class but resisted by the masses, exemplifying one of the most explosive class struggles of this century.

Indeed, any discussion of the integration of Bangladesh into the world capitalist system is bound to remain incomplete without a discussion of foreign direct investment in the country. The energy and power sectors, in particular, have constituted the profitable sites of foreign direct investment since 1994. The gas reserves in Bangladesh—for quite some time now—have attracted foreign direct investment, particularly multinational corporations for which the World Bank has been an ardent advocate. Over a period of time, the World Bank has been even more blatant about the issue of exporting gas, suggesting, along with its allies, that Bangladesh should export gas through a pipeline to India for a “bright future,” as envisioned by the bank itself in 1982 (World Bank, *Bangladesh: Recent Economic Developments*).

Since the mid-1990s, in fact, the level of foreign direct investment has dramatically increased. Thus we increasingly see the presence of multinational corporations not only in gas, but also in electricity and telecommunication, and certainly clothing industries. New contracts were signed in those sectors. According to the 1999 report provided by the World Bank itself—*Foreign Direct Investment in Bangladesh*—since 1996, the annual averages of the highest capital

inflows of foreign direct investment could be seen in the gas sector (amounting to \$134 million), followed by the power sector (\$113 million), while foreign direct investment in the Export Processing Zones remained relatively low (\$58 million). And in the 1999 report, we see a shifting of focus in the World Bank's approach in that it reported that the foreign direct investment inflows were not helping the economy, as most of the foreign direct investment inflow was in the form of foreign imports related to the projects. Thus the World Bank pushed for the increased exporting of gas. The report indicated that "there is no discernible accumulation of foreign exchange reserves in the absence of gas exports" (*Foreign Direct Investment in Bangladesh* 7).

This export of gas again turns out to be an area over which the World Bank and multinational corporations—through the mediation of the Bangladesh government—have been exercising their monopolies for quite some time now, prompting the country's remarkable mass-movement, called the Phulbari Movement, a movement which I discuss later in greater detail. It should also be pointed out here that the U.S. itself plays a decisive role in the exploitation of gas reserves in Bangladesh. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Bangladesh, in fact, has gone to great lengths to map out Bangladesh's natural gas resources, presumably to "aid" the country. In coordination with the U.S. Department of Energy, USAID has amassed a great deal of information regarding Bangladesh's natural gas resources.<sup>6</sup> As the document states, this project "allows for transfer of new technology, modeling practices and geoscience theory from existing and established programs in the United States to the Government of Bangladesh, Petrobangla and Bangladesh academia" (Persits, et al. par. 1).

From the foregoing discussions—a great deal of which has been deliberately devoted to the World Bank itself for the simple reason that it continues to remain a major actor in Bangladesh—a number of interconnected points emerge, points that underline the integration of Bangladesh into the world capitalist system and its class implications for the majority of the people in Bangladesh. Among the points emerging, first, it is clear that international financial institutions—particularly the World Bank itself—harbor an orthodox version of new classical economics, which Anu Muhammad has termed as “economic fundamentalism” (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 135). Second, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF not only enjoy supremacist authority in a third world site like Bangladesh, but also show no accountability to anyone except to the U.S. and a few other first-world countries. As Muhammad points out, “these institutions act as the vanguard or managerial bodies of G-7 countries and multinational corporations to integrate peripheral economies according to the needs of the international monopoly capital” (“Bangladesh’s Integration” 135).

Of course, all this is not to suggest that the role of the nation-state is simply absent, although it is dominated by those international institutions. The national ruling classes in Bangladesh, in a variety of ways, have mediated, facilitated, and even warmly welcomed the interventions of the World Bank and other financial institutions, including the U.S., and thus facilitating and mediating the inflow of world monopoly capital in Bangladesh—capital whose logics prompt the monopolization of the country’s markets, natural and other material resources available, and certainly “cheap” labor. Finally, it would be no exaggeration to maintain that the World Bank and other financial institutions, including the U.S. government, together forming the economic basis of U.S. imperialism, have now proven to be decisive threats to the sovereignty of



the country on the one hand, and to the economic security of the working-class people and peasants, on the other. Finally, Anu Muhammad sums up the entire scenario thus:

The global institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, determine every aspect of Bangladesh's economy and society including its agriculture, environment, occupations, water flow, state of industry and even the mindset of the so-called civil society in the process of integrating Bangladesh into the world capitalist system. The policies of different governments regarding industry, agriculture, education, health, trade, environment, poverty, women have only given legitimacy to the policies outlined much earlier by the bodies not accountable to the people of this land. And through these actions, jointly taken by the local governments and the global institutions, Bangladesh has been moving steadily towards full integration into the global capitalist system. ("Bangladesh's Integration" 136)

I have so far talked about the World Bank at some length, while focusing on Anu Muhammad's crucial essay. I have greatly drawn upon Muhammad's essay for a few important reasons. First, it is extremely well-researched and rich in empirical data, including the data provided by the World Bank itself. Second, the essay is representative of a politically significant position that emerged out of people's actually-existing movements, including the Phulbari Movement, in which Anu Muhammad has been a remarkable participant himself for several years now. Third, this essay—despite its richness and people-centeredness—is virtually ignored in mainstream economic discourses in Bangladesh and in the West, discourses that remain concerned with measuring the GDP of Bangladesh and the efficiency of Bangladeshi labor, while providing mathematically-oriented econometric models without paying attention to the hard social and economic realities of the working-class people and the poor peasants of Bangladesh.

Although the World Bank so far has constituted our discussion, it should be noted here that over the past four decades, Bangladesh has had plenty of "development" projects and, ironically enough, accumulated a huge international debt for achieving this so-called development. During this particular process, of course, an immense number of consultancy

firms, think tanks, and particularly NGOs emerged, contributing to the process of integrating Bangladesh into the world capitalist system.

I think I would do well to make some observations about the role of NGOs in Bangladesh, the role that has even somewhat marginalized the role of the state under certain circumstances. Several scholars have taken up this point. For instance, in her relatively recent essay “Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh,” Lamia Karim talks about the marginal role of the state in Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas: “there is the virtual absence of the state in the rural economy. NGOs dominate the rural economy from rural credit to telecommunications to primary education” (12). Karim even goes to the extent of arguing that the dominant role played by NGOs in Bangladesh has led to a new state formation: “the NGO sector in Bangladesh signals a new kind of state formation for the 21st century, one that is a cross between private capital and welfarism” (26). However, Karim does not talk about how the NGO sector is not only tied to private capital, but tied to international monopoly capital as well.

Now Bangladesh houses some of the largest NGOs in the world, such as the Grameen Bank. In his essay called “Non-governmental Organizations and Civil Society in Bangladesh,” Jerry Buckland makes certain observations about the growth of the NGO sector in Bangladesh.

Buckland writes:

From the mid-1970s, NGOs in Bangladesh experienced rapid growth, both in terms of numbers and size (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). Estimates of the number of NGOs in Bangladesh vary widely depending on how they are defined. Interestingly, one common way to quantify the number of specialized development NGOs is to determine the number receiving foreign funds, information available from the government’s NGO Affairs Bureau. (152)

But regardless of how they are defined, what do these NGOs do in Bangladesh? Buckland makes

a few observations which I think are valid:

NGOs in Bangladesh have been active in community based development stressing accumulation of physical capital and technical change (through microcredit, agricultural promotion), social services (through non-formal education programmes highlighting literacy, life skills and political conscientisation), and community organizing (through conscientisation education and group capacity building). (152)

Such activities might look attractive and even people-oriented in the first place. But, as I will show later in the case of the Grameen Bank in particular and also in the case of other NGOs, the NGO model has been considered ideal in certain cases by the international financial institutions themselves.

As Anu Muhammad points out in his essay “Monga, Micro Credit and the Nobel Prize,” the NGOs, despite their early beginnings marked by their apparent commitment to struggle against exploitation, increasingly became corporatized in such a way that they either directly or indirectly keep responding to the logics of capitalism. In fact, the concentration with which NGOs work in different pockets of the country prompts me to think of a version of “micro-capitalism” as one that is germane to the NGOs operating in Bangladesh. Over a period of time, although the number of NGOs has massively increased, only a few big NGOs have hitherto become truly dominant in the country, monopolizing a number of areas while mirroring the role of multinational corporations. Anu Muhammad explicitly points out,

Big NGOs are also in the process of forming alliances with multinational corporations. To give a few examples: BRAC work with UNOCAL and Monsanto; the Grameen Bank, the Bank in NGO model, initially intended to work with Monsanto but failed due to resistance, has now been intensely working with multinational telecommunication company. Recently it has started a project with Denom, the French food company. All in the name of ‘poverty alleviation’! It is therefore not surprising to find Muhammad Yunus always advocating for the privatization of public institutions or services and liberalization of the economy in favour of global corporates. (“Monga, Micro Credit” par. 14)

Thus it is evident that NGOs, too, have played crucial roles in integrating Bangladesh

into the world capitalist system by way of facilitating the operations of multinational corporations on the one hand, and on the other, by way of managing to pacify social discontent and conflicts from time to time through short-term reform measures, while thus repeatedly obscuring the sites of actual material contradictions. Indeed, one can safely assert that the NGOs in Bangladesh—given the continuing underdevelopment of the country—have never been interested in eradicating poverty as such, but only making it tolerable to the point that any social upheaval doesn't take place, while the poor themselves become dependent on aid, charity, credit, and other means without developing their political consciousness and enacting a revolutionary praxis against the entire system of domination that keeps them perpetually poor, or at least keeps poverty bearable, while only making changes here and there in their predicament through certain interventions, measures, and some reforms.

The feminist scholar Lamia Karim has even argued—in her essay “Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh”—that the NGOs have limited the imagination of the poor in the sense that all they can imagine at this point in terms of their economic freedom is *loans*. As Karim further argues, “[i]n the absence or a weakening of progressive social movements in many postcolonial countries, these NGOs are able to set themselves up as working with the ‘poorest of the poor’, and install themselves as *the* progressive voice in rural society” (8). It is true that some of the NGOs have even used Paulo Freire, particularly his theory of conscientization! In the case of Bangladesh, it is a massive, even brutal irony that Paulo Freire has been pressed into the service of limiting the horizon of people's consciousness—people (particularly the constituencies of certain NGOs) don't seem interested in talking about fundamental changes in their predicament or movements, for that matter, but they

seem interested in getting immediate financial assistance, particularly loans. In other words, by and large, NGOs in Bangladesh not only operate within, and even enhance, the capitalist political economy, but they also remain imbricated in a capitalist culture that promotes the subject-object relationship while depoliticizing the public consciousness in the interest of the accumulation of profit. This depoliticization itself is fundamentally a class phenomenon in Bangladesh, a phenomenon without which capitalism cannot reproduce itself in peripheral economic formations.

### **The U.S. and/in Bangladesh**

What does the reproduction of capitalism in peripheral economic formations have to do with the U.S.? Of course, as I have pointed out, the U.S. has been present in Bangladesh since—and even before—its birth as a nation-state. To speak of the U.S. is to speak of the U.S. government as well as the current phase of imperialism—U.S. imperialism. This imperialism, as I suggested, is both economic and cultural, and its economic operations cannot be dissociated from the operations of the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, and even from so-called “donor” agencies and NGOs invading and intervening in peripheral economies under capitalism. My earlier account of the World Bank did not directly mention the role of the U.S. there, but I should point out here that the World Bank in Bangladesh, from time to time, has sought assistance and suggestions from the U.S. while the U.S. also gave suggestions to the World Bank since the days of the so-called “green revolution” in Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) in the 1960s, an initiative which actually began with both support and suggestions from the U.S.

In this section, I will dwell on other aspects of U.S. imperialism, while keeping the

connections between U.S. imperialism and international financial institutions in sight. Let me then begin by historicizing the nature of U.S. imperialism in Bangladesh. When India was partitioned by the British in 1947, the region known as East Bengal became East Pakistan. Resistances to rule by Pakistan and to U.S. imperialism grew in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), particularly headed by the East Pakistan Communist Party. In the 1960s, as Badruddin Umar relates in volume two of his *The Emergence of Bangladesh: Rise of Bengali Nationalism, 1958-1971*):

At this [1968] Congress [of the East Pakistan Communist Party] a programme of the East Pakistan Communist Party was adopted. It was prepared on the basis of the documents adopted in the conference of eighty-one parties in Moscow in 1960. The principal strategic objective of the programme was to end the exploitation by the US imperialists and the exploitation and rule of monopoly capitalists, to complete the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal and anti-capitalist national democratic revolution and to advance along the path of non-capitalist development with a view to attaining the socialist stage. (131)

The East Pakistan Communist Party aimed for a broad-based alliance of “workers, peasants, middle-class intellectuals and a section of the national bourgeoisie” (131) in order to oppose—as Umar puts it—“US imperialism, the big bourgeoisie, feudal landowners, and the central government which represented their interests” (131). The objective of this alliance was, then, to establish an independent, socialist nation-state.

From the very beginning, Washington was unambiguous in its support of Pakistan and opposition to the movement for independence in East Pakistan. The U.S. government simply did nothing to intervene, then, while hundreds of thousands—and some say millions—of Bengalis were brutally killed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh’s 1971 War of Independence. Rather, the U.S. remained solidly on the side of Pakistan. In a phone conversation with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on March 29, 1971, President Nixon had this to say of Bangladesh: “The real

question is whether anybody can run the god-damn place” (U.S. Dept. of State, *South Asia Crisis* 36). And in another phone conversation with Kissinger the next day, President Nixon said, “The main thing to do is to keep cool and not do anything” (U.S. Dept. of State, *South Asia Crisis* 37). It was around this time that Kissinger famously characterized Bangladesh as “an international basket case” (Hitchens 50). While these statements were made in casual conversations, they are indicative of the Nixon administration’s position vis-à-vis Bangladesh. It should be emphasized here that when the Bengali freedom-fighters were sacrificing their lives to achieve a new nation-state and were indeed in the midst of their liberation war, the U.S. government did not merely diplomatically oppose the liberation movement, but even militarily opposed it by sending its seventh fleet to the Bay of Bengal in support of Pakistan as a direct threat to Bangladeshi freedom-fighters.

Despite the pronounced and increasing U.S. imperial opposition to the National Liberation Movement of Bangladesh, the country finally achieved its independence in 1971 in exchange for millions of lives and a war-devastated land. Indeed, the land was not only devastated and the economy completely ruined, but a widespread famine also broke out soon after independence in 1974. That famine killed 27,000 people according to official estimates, although the toll was probably closer to 100,000, as Rehman Sobhan relates in *The Crisis of External Dependence: The Political Economy of Foreign Aid to Bangladesh* (44). While Sobhan argues that the politics of external dependence on aid was to blame for the famine, he also points to the fact that the U.S. government made the decision to withhold food shipments to Bangladesh in 1974, in order to register its disapproval of Bangladesh’s trade ties to socialist countries, particularly Cuba. And in her essay “Food Politics”—which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in

1976—Emma Rothschild even argues that the U.S. government played a decisive role in the widespread extent of the famine by withholding desperately-needed food aid at that critical point.

The New Delhi-based food and trade policy analyst Devinda Sharma has more recently documented this history thus:

At the height of the 1974 famine in the newly born Bangladesh, the US had withheld 2.2 million tonnes of food aid to ‘ensure that it abandoned plans to try Pakistani war criminals’. And a year later, when Bangladesh was faced with severe monsoons and imminent floods, the then US Ambassador to Bangladesh made it abundantly clear that the US probably could not commit food aid because of Bangladesh’s policy of exporting jute to Cuba. And by the time Bangladesh succumbed to the American pressure, and stopped jute exports to Cuba, the food aid in transit was ‘too late for famine victims’. (“Famine as Commerce” par. 14)

The fallout of the restricted flow of aid meant that Bangladesh turned to the World Bank in desperation, and made the pact to trade in its original ideals of socialism and nationalism that had been established in the constitution for economic liberalization and the development of the private sector. In other words, it is because of the pressures of U.S. imperialism and the World Bank—and also in the interest of the national ruling classes—that the ideals of socialism in particular, the ideals that at least partly informed the liberation war of Bangladesh, were all abandoned.

The initial nationalization efforts were abandoned as well in the direction of de-nationalization, rather privatization. Since the time of Zia-ur Rahman (from the mid-1970s onwards), the privatization efforts gathered momentum and kept progressively increasing through each successive government. Indeed, as Naila Kabeer points out in “The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State of Bangladesh,” “The rapid de-nationalization of the economy under Zia created a newly rich class of entrepreneurs and traders whose interests were tied to those of the government in power and who became its allies” (42). Indeed, the de-



nationalization of the economy under Zia involved a number of elements. For one, there was a massive increase in foreign aid. Because Bangladesh dropped its declaration of socialism and of secularism, it garnered more donors from the West (for the move away from socialism) and from the Persian Gulf (for the religious posture). Secondly, international agencies—which were already present in Bangladesh since the early seventies—began to play a larger role in state governance, while the role of the state became rather marginal.

In fact, the role of the state—although marginal—is nevertheless not inconsequential in the sense that it has remained willingly subservient to the dictates of U.S. imperialism and the World Bank and other financial institutions, and even NGOs. As far as the bourgeois government is concerned, it has always been an ardent ally of the U.S. As Azfar Hussain maintains emphatically in his Bengali essay “Markin Shamrajjer Shamprotik Bakyaron [The Contemporary Grammar of U.S. Imperialism],”

Not a single bourgeois administration of Bangladesh since 1971 has been able to say no to the pressures, dictates, suggestions, and recommendations of the U.S., while in many instances each administration has even welcomed the interventions of the U.S. and the World Bank and other financial institutions, linked as they are, from time to time. For instance, even the so-called founding father of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, despite his initial socialist postures and pronouncements, became increasingly pro-American, while Zia-ur Rahman was an open boot-licker of the U.S. administration. The two major bourgeois parties in Bangladesh that have alternately run the country since 1971 have been equally pro-U.S. imperialist and thus themselves have threatened the sovereignty and security of the country itself. But who are anti-imperialists in Bangladesh? The answer is simple: the people—the toiling masses whose so-called cheap labor is routinely exploited by multinational corporations or U.S. imperialist capitalism. (36)

Indeed, the U.S. has either refused to provide aid to Bangladesh in critical times, or it has stepped in to provide “aid” with strings attached, aid that set Bangladesh up for exploitation, an imperialist relationship with unequal power-relations and production-relations. Consider these

observations, for instance, from Badruddin Umar in his relatively recent foreword to Mahfuz Chowdhury's book, *Economic Exploitation of Bangladesh*. Umar maintains that the United States is

the most important factor in this process [of exploiting the people in Bangladesh] as an imperialist country which in pursuit of its 'new world order' and 'open market policy' is pressurizing the Bangladeshi ruling classes and their governments to systematically dismantle and destroy industries, to throw millions of workers out of employment and push the country's economy towards rapid ruination. ("Foreword" xv)

Umar has been writing—and organizing—in resistance to U.S. imperialism in Bangladesh for almost forty years now, and his basic critique of U.S. imperialism has been consistent. In 1972, for instance, just after the formation of Bangladesh, Umar made the following observations in *Politics and Society in Bangladesh*, in the chapter unambiguously titled "The Ascendency of U.S. Imperialism in Bangladesh":

No sensible man [*sic*] in this country can any longer deny the fact that within seven months of the overthrow of Pakistan, Bangladesh has fallen under the grip of world imperialism, particularly its leader, the United States of America. But uninformed persons, men used to stupid political rigmarole, anti-social elements and lackeys of the ruling classes still continue to believe and propagate that it is not so. They also charge and openly make accusations against all sections of political opposition by saying that they are trying to frustrate all anti-imperialist, particularly anti-U.S., policies of the government of Bangladesh. These latter groups of men still continue their talk about anti-imperialism, socialism, etc. and without the slightest scruple of conscience proceed to build "socialism" with money and commodities supplied by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc. and their patron and principal, the government of the United States. (60)

Umar makes an explicit connection between the World Bank, the IMF, and U.S. imperialism, a point that I have already dwelt on. But Umar is also talking about the functioning of hegemony here: the ruling class in Bangladesh talks of socialism, while reproducing capitalism. Also, a number of left intellectual-activists from Bangladesh—such as Serajul Islam Choudhury, Anu

Muhammad, and Nurul Kabir—have all variously examined and interrogated the history of the changing but continuous relationship between U.S. imperialism and the national ruling classes in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup>

U.S. imperialism in Bangladesh also has to do with how U.S. multinational corporations keep exploiting the domestic markets, the labor markets, and natural resources in Bangladesh. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the involvement of U.S. multinational corporations in Bangladesh, but to point out certain trends. A number of U.S. based multinational corporations have invested in Bangladesh, such as Chevron and the former Unocal Corporation (which merged with Chevron in 2005) which invested in the natural gas sector, a number of U.S.-based clothing industries, with WalMart being the giant among them, which have invested in the Export Processing Zones. Since 1971, the role of U.S. multinational corporations has increasingly gathered momentum, targeting the country's "cheap" labor—in other words, the labor of women and even children—as well as the country's natural resources, particularly oil and gas reserves.

### **The Role of the National Ruling Class**

In the face of all this, of course, the role of the national ruling classes might appear marginal but it is hugely consequential, a point that I already made in this chapter. Of course, to say that its role is marginal is not to let the national ruling classes off the hook, a point that Badruddin Umar repeatedly makes in his works.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Umar has theorized the formation of the national bourgeoisie in Bangladesh in significant ways, pointing to its anti-people character and its characteristic pro-imperialist orientation:

Subsequent to the emergence of Bangladesh as an “independent” nation-state (in 1971), its ruling class has been formed mainly through such practices as plunder and corruption rather than through “exploitation,” the persistence of the latter notwithstanding. Through this process, instead of developing and maturing as an exploitative and reactionary class, the ruling class has rapidly constituted itself as one that characteristically thrives on plunder and violence. Today what we witness in Bangladesh is exactly the rule and regime of this plundering lumpen-bourgeoisie. (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 1)

In other words, Badruddin Umar makes a distinction between the western capitalists and the national ruling classes whom Umar calls “lumpen-bourgeoisie,” not even full bourgeoisie. It is this class that has routinely been submissive to U.S. imperialism. Umar continues:

The rich capitalist, the bourgeoisie, is primarily a reactionary element in society who lives on exploitation. The bourgeoisie builds mountains of social wealth by exploiting surplus-value from what the labour-power of the proletariat produces. It is in the interest of exploitation that the bourgeoisie also institutes and mobilizes concomitant and corresponding administrative and coercive apparatuses, mechanisms, and measures. But the ruling class in Bangladesh that remains compulsively disposed to loot existing wealth and resources through corruption and violence—instead of appropriating surplus-value in the process of production as the source of accumulating wealth—is constitutively and qualitatively different from the exploitative bourgeoisie of the kind described above. (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 1-2)

In other words, the actual exploitation of labor-power occurs through foreign capital, while this exploitation is facilitated by the national ruling class. In addition, this ruling class directly plunders the resources of the people of Bangladesh. Although violent in nature, the ruling class in Bangladesh is—in some fundamental ways—very weak in terms of its ability to govern the people through meeting their needs. It is this very weakness, as Umar further argues, that prompts this class to rely on a configuration of foreign forces or on imperialism itself, particularly U.S. imperialism. To quote Umar: “In fact, the support from US imperialism constitutes the most indispensable condition for the survival and sustenance of the ruling class in Bangladesh today” (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 2).

I again draw on Umar's impressive narrative that contours the ruling-class scenario in Bangladesh in relation to both capitalism and imperialism. Let me, then, quote Umar once more:

In addition to mills and industries, the banks in Bangladesh remain the target of the ruling-class plunderers and robbers. Loan-defaulters—who owe thousands and thousands of crores of Taka to the banks—have brought these institutions to such a critical situation that the financial system of the country is beset with insurmountable crises today. Thousands and thousands of bank employees are currently facing threats of dismissal. (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 2)

Of course, since 2003, a number of bank employees have indeed lost their jobs as a result of the deterioration of the country's financial system. No less significantly, the government has also remarkably contributed to the deterioration of the country's communication structures such as its railway system. In fact, attempts have already been made to turn the Bangladesh Railway into a corporation in such a way that this means of transport can eventually be destroyed in the interest of foreign and imperialist automobile industries from the U.S., Japan, and India. I have already mentioned the role of the Bangladeshi national ruling classes in helping foreign oil companies extract and deplete the most valuable fuel resource in the country—gas—through exporting it from Bangladesh to India through U.S. companies.

But under the governance of the national lumpen-bourgeoisie, as Umar already called it, the land-system in Bangladesh has also been facing serious crises for quite some time now. In fact, this land-system has caused a number of interconnected socio-economic problems in Bangladesh. As Umar points out,

Such problems do not merely include an acute lack of employment for the rural poor—including peasants and the rural proletariat—but also generally deter the development of agriculture and industry. The ruling class has created anarchy in the sphere of agriculture by gradually reducing the size of such crucial organizations as Bangladesh Agricultural

Development Corporation (BADC) and thus diminishing their usefulness. And all this is being done in response to the imperatives and injunctions of such imperialist financial institutions as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank (ADB). (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 2)

Umar further points out that given the lumpen-bourgeois political culture prevailing in Bangladesh since 1971, dishonest business owners, retired bureaucrats, military officials, and other corrupt delinquents predominantly figure in the political parties and organizations of the ruling classes, thus contributing to what Umar has famously called the “criminalization of politics.” Umar also calls attention to the predicament of minorities in Bangladesh under the governance of the ruling class. As he argues,

In a country like Bangladesh, where its plundering ruling class has established a reign of terror, it is understandable that the safety and security of all minorities continue to remain at stake in general. This is why religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities are subject to all forms of oppression in the country. Since the establishment of Bangladesh as a nation-state, the ruling-class political party Awami League relentlessly looted and misappropriated the property of the Hindu minority by merely nominally changing “Enemy Property Law” to “Vested Property Law.” In a similar tradition, immediately following the election of October 01, 2001, oppression of the religious minority intensified in alarming proportions. Much of their property came under direct attacks and assaults. Some members of the Hindu minority even lost their lives in the hands of the assaulters. (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 2)

Religious minorities are not the only constituencies that have suffered under the governance of the Bangladeshi national lumpen-bourgeoisie. Other ethnic and linguistic minorities continue to remain subject to oppression and even direct persecution.<sup>9</sup> Umar goes to the extent of asserting:

What holds true in the case of religious minorities also applies to the predicament of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Bangladesh today. Violence perpetrated on such ethnic minorities as Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Murang, etc., of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as on Munda, Santal, Garo, Khasia, Manipuri, Rakhain, among others, is indeed a regular practice. Such minorities are being uprooted from their own homes and their own

land. Their cultural life remains in jeopardy, while many of them live like exiles or aliens in their own country. (“Come Forward to Save Bangladesh” 2)

In other words, as Umar has demonstrated in his numerous works such as *General Crisis of the Bourgeoisie in Bangladesh* and *The Emergence of Bangladesh*, the mainstream lumpen-bourgeois political culture in Bangladesh has deeply reinforced various forms of oppression, all of which can certainly be connected to capitalism and imperialism. These are the kinds of oppressions—arising within a given national boundary—that render imperialism naked. To paraphrase John Bellamy Foster’s *Naked Imperialism*, U.S. imperialism today is not simply imperialism, but it is naked, unambiguously aggressive and arrogant imperialism, the kind that corresponds to the unambiguously oppressive lumpen-bourgeois political culture which, of course, remains hostile to women in all sorts of ways.

Indeed, given the contexts of Bangladesh, the specific workings of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy—including the class struggles of which I have already spoken—cannot be understood meaningfully without accounting for the conditions and struggles of women in Bangladesh. Of course, my entire study is focused on women. But in the following section, I want to provide a symptomatic and brief overview of the status of women in certain contexts in Bangladesh, particularly in the contexts of national politics and the political economy of patriarchal capitalism that necessitates a gender/class dialectic rather than employing gender as an isolated or even sovereign category.

To briefly review, then, I have tried in this chapter to provide a rather symptomatic account of the ways in which capitalism and U.S. imperialism have underdeveloped Bangladesh. I have argued that an orchestrated class-alliance can be seen among the U.S. government, U.S.

corporations, the national ruling class in Bangladesh, NGOs, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. It is this class alliance that has made possible the insertion of Bangladesh into the global capitalist system such that Bangladesh remains necessarily underdeveloped, despite the overabundance of “development” agencies and agendas in the country. But no less significantly, this class-alliance itself is variously overdetermined by patriarchy. And poor women in Bangladesh—as in other “developing” (read underdeveloped) countries—have, and continue to bear the largest brunt of oppression and exploitation that come as a direct result of such underdevelopment, as I explain in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER SIX

### THE MARGINS OF THE MARGINAL: THE GENDERED SUBALTERN IN BANGLADESH

[W]hat I call the “gendered subaltern,” especially in decolonized space, has become the name “woman” for me. [...] [T]he name “woman,” in this sense, has shifted for me into the subaltern of contemporary colonization.

—Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (140)

Whose pictures are on the billboard?

Women’s.

Who are walking naked?

Women.

Who cover their whole body?

Women.

Who have a thousand hair styles?

Women.

Who put extra colour on their faces?

Women.

Who need ornaments for their noses, ears, hands and feet?

Women.

Whose backs have black bruises?

Women.

Who are in tears?

Women.

Who get killed in the dead of night?

Women.

Who was smiling on the billboards?

Women.

—Taslima Nasreen, “The Commodity” (*All About Women* 59)

In the previous chapter I have provided a symptomatic account of the underdevelopment of Bangladesh within the structures and logics of capitalism and U.S. imperialism, and of the orchestrated class-alliance of the U.S. government, U.S. corporations, the national ruling class in

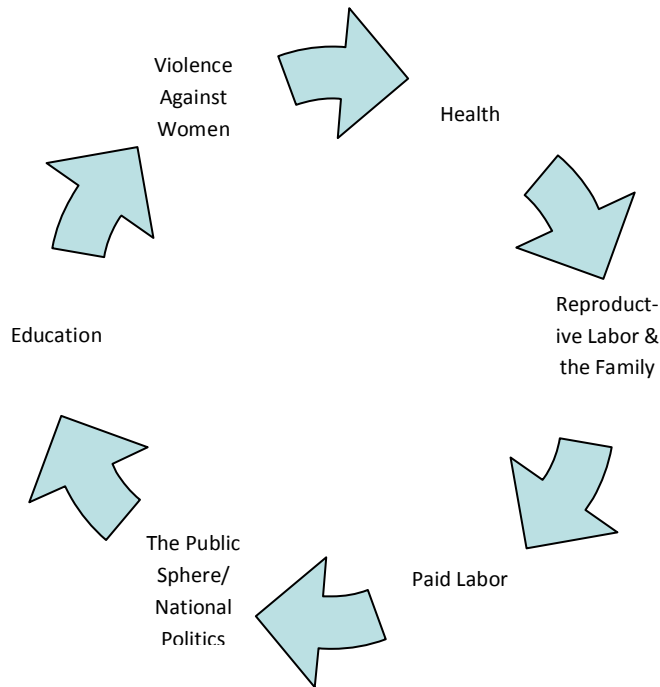
Bangladesh, NGOs, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. In this chapter, I intend to provide an analysis of the current status of women in Bangladesh with a particular focus on what Spivak calls the “gendered subaltern” (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 140). I discuss certain representative spheres in which women have been either present or absent in Bangladesh—spheres such as the public sphere and national politics, education, violence against women, health, reproductive labor and the family, and paid labor. I offer certain symptomatic instances of the status of women in Bangladesh, particularly of the ways in which poor women in Bangladesh are subject to multiple forms of violence, oppression, and exploitation, and end up bearing the largest brunt of oppression and exploitation that come as a direct result of the underdevelopment of Bangladesh. But, in opposition to the World Bank and other NGO documents that tend to fix and freeze poor women as objects of oppression, and evacuate them of their agency, I also underscore women’s agency in a number of ways.

Let me then begin by offering some general information about the current situation of women in Bangladesh. As the World Bank and development agencies now place women at the center of their analysis, and the Women in Development (WID) model has replaced some of the earlier development models, information regarding the status of women in Bangladesh abounds, and is even overwhelming. Indeed, in some circles, Bangladesh is popularly known as the NGO capital of the world, which means that NGO activities directed toward the Bangladeshi poor—and especially women—have proliferated, and also that NGOs have monopolized the production of knowledge regarding women.

In fact, it is difficult to find information on the status of women in Bangladesh that has not been filtered through the NGO-World Bank lens of analysis. Given the power-knowledge nexus at work in the production of data, statistics, reports, and the like, we face a fundamental problem in that the very institutions that hold the most power over women's lives—particularly poor women—are the same ones that produce the vast majority of the research available to the West. And while there are locally-based feminist organizations functioning in Bangladesh and conducting their own research, such as Naripokkho and Mahila Parishad, their funds are limited, and thus they are dependent primarily on volunteers. So, given all these limitations, I approach such facts and figures with caution, as development agencies that feed reports to institutions such as the World Bank are often more invested in the maintenance of their funding than in the actual liberation of women.

With such a critical awareness of the problematic nature of statistics on the status of women in Bangladesh, let us then look at some of them, as statistics still do reveal certain patterns which can be used in the interest of feminist scholarship and activism. As I have already pointed out, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and women living there, understandably, can thus be called the poorest of the poor, while also constituting nearly half of the population of the country. In fact, sometimes they are called “the silent majority.” It might be helpful at this point to approach certain spheres even categorically—which we can take as indicators—in which women have been either present or absent: 1) the public sphere and national politics, 2) violence against women, 3) education, 4) health, 5) reproductive labor and the family, and 6) paid labor. For the sake of conceptual convenience, I would like to represent these indicators diagrammatically:

## Diagram V: Indicators of the Status of Women in Bangladesh



### Women in the Public Sphere

Let me first examine the public sphere and national politics as they relate to women. In her essay “Women Look Forward”—included in anthology titled *Bangladesh in the New Millennium*—Mahmuda Islam talks about the situation of women in the public sphere of Bangladesh. She cites the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, which declares in article 28:

- (1) The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- (2) Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life.

(3) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment, resort or admission to any educational institution. (qtd. in Islam 4)

Provision for gender equality is thus an integral part of the founding documents of Bangladesh. And the constitution further declares that men and women should be treated equally in terms of employment in any occupation or vocation: “No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, be discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office in the service of the Republic” (qtd. in Islam 4). Article 40 of the constitution makes this same point in slightly different terms:

Subject to any restrictions imposed by law, every citizen possessing such qualifications, if any, as may be prescribed by law in relation to his profession, occupation, trade or business shall have the right to enter upon any lawful profession or occupation, and to conduct any lawful trade and business. (qtd. in Islam 5)

While Bangladesh was established as a nation-state according to such principles of equality, the constitution was amended in 1977 to make “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah a fundamental principle of state policy and the basis of all actions” (Tahmina par. 5). While the clauses pertaining to women’s equal rights were not removed from the constitution, the problem—as Sultana Kamal, executive director of the human rights organization “Ain Shalish Kendra” put it—was that there was no way of knowing “which clauses would prevail in matters of women's rights” (qtd. in Tahmina par. 5).

And as recently as 2004, the Bangladesh government again negated some of the crucial principles of equality that had been established by the government in 1997, an outcome of the UN’s Beijing Women’s Conference. In “Bangladesh: Women’s Policy Sneakily Changed by

Government,” Qurratul Ain Tahmina explains that in 2005 feminist activists essentially stumbled on the fact that in the previous year the government had quietly changed the National Policy for Advancement of Women, and had negated some of its equality principles:

A government source told IPS [International League for Peace and Women] that Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed was part of the cabinet committee that revised the policy. Asked by IPS if that was indeed the case Ahmed, a barrister, said, “I might have been (part of the committee) but don't exactly remember.” Ahmed added he had no idea of the policy or the changes. Pressed with examples, the minister expressed surprise that the previous government had provided for equal inheritance rights. “No government in Bangladesh can commit to equal shares in inheritance. It's a very nice deal but will go against Quranic principles.” (Tahmina par. 2)

Given the references to the Quranic principles such as this one, feminist activists suspected that Islamist groups like Jama‘at-i Islami<sup>1</sup>—an Islamic fundamentalist political party—had been involved in the revisions of the policy. Thus the gains that have been made for women even in the constitution of Bangladesh continue to remain under attack. In *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices Against Oppression*, Ida Lichter makes the following observations about the changes that were made in the government’s policy:

The new policy in 2005 eliminated equality in areas of assets and inheritance and no longer encouraged the women’s rights movement and NGOs. Clauses in favor of placing women in senior posts, including the Foreign Service and the judiciary, were deleted. Women were to be employed in “appropriate” professions. On violence against women, the 1997 policy expressed concern about state or police violence and community edicts subjecting women to public lashing, stoning, and even burning to death, but the 2005 policy did not mention these issues. (83)

While such changes in the constitution are no doubt disturbing, I should also point out that there is a vast difference between the statements in the constitution and the actual freedom women enjoy in Bangladesh, which becomes evident upon an examination of the spheres I mention

above. But let me now turn to how the Bangladesh government has taken up the question of patriarchy in other ways.

The state has given certain lip-service to gender equality at certain points in its history. For instance, Bangladesh was the first country in Asia and the Pacific region to establish a Ministry which dealt with the issues and concerns of women. In her book *Why Women Count: Essays on Development in Bangladesh*, for instance, Shamim Hamid examines this history, recounting the fact that a Women's Affairs Division was created in Bangladesh in 1976, and then in 1978 it was elevated to the status of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, and later came to encompass children as well, renamed as the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in 1994. Hamid then provides a history of how the Ministry of Women's Affairs was included in the five-year plans of the Bangladesh government. From the Second Five Year Plan (1980-85) onward, the role of women was concretized in the plan itself. In that plan, for the first time, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was given a separate budget, although it was only a token 0.02 percent of the total budget. In the Third Five Year Plan (1985-90), the same percentage of the budget was given to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In the Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-1995), there were some explicit goals listed in the plan regarding women's issues, plans such as:

- raising female literacy substantially
- increasing jobs for women and improving working conditions through expanding training
- providing credit facilities for women, health care facilities for women and improving their nutritional status (Hamid 104)

Now, while some efforts were made at the state level to realize some of these plans, and despite the fact that Bangladesh has had two female prime ministers in succession—the BNP's Khaleda

Zia and the Awami League's Sheikh Hasina—women are still tokenized at best within the government and the political establishment.

Indeed, the general conditions of women over the last ten years have generally deteriorated in almost all spheres.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent budgets have shown miniscule increase in the budget allocated to the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs; in 1999 the ministry was allocated 0.08 percent of the national budget, in 2000 this amount increased only slightly to 0.12 percent, and then again decreased in 2001 with 0.10 percent of the budget, and assumed only 0.09 percent of the budget in 2002 (Rahman, "Gender Disaggregation" 289). Since then, the budget has seen no significant increase.

Women's representation at the level of local governance in Bangladesh is also profoundly insufficient, although it has somewhat increased over the years. Since 1976 the government has set a token 10 percent quota for women officers in all government ministries, directorates, and other autonomous bodies. Such a quota is extremely low according to international standards, and certainly does not indicate that the government takes gender equity seriously. Even with such a low quota, it is not consistently filled. According to the Bangladesh government's own report to the UN in 2003, for instance, only 80 percent of the total quota for women in government positions had been filled that year, while even less (60 percent) of the quota for women in administration and technical positions had been filled.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, women held only seven of the 300 general seats in the legislature, two of which were filled by the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina (Tahmina par. 6). Even the Asian Development Bank (ADB) admits to the dismal representation of women in the



government in their country briefing paper, *Women in Bangladesh* (2001): “Although two women Prime Ministers have headed the Government during the last six years and the leaders of the opposition in Parliament were also women, this does not reflect the gender composition of participation and decision making at the highest policy level. At the ministerial level, women’s representation has never risen above 3 percent” (16).

Certain policies regarding women have been established at the state level. Since Bangladesh’s participation in the Beijing Platform in 1995, for instance, the government has formulated some additional policies regarding the status of women in Bangladesh. The National Policy for the Advancement of Women was drafted by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in 1997. This policy included regulations regarding women’s human rights and basic freedoms; the elimination of all forms of oppression against women and girls; ensuring women’s activity and equal rights in all activities of the economy; increasing the employment of women and of support services such as childcare; food security, and empowering women in their access to government services.<sup>4</sup>

Such a policy is no doubt wide-sweeping, which some people might commend to a certain extent as at least a token effort to attend to the situation of women in Bangladesh, but its wide-sweeping and lofty character is also its downfall in that it is fairly impossible to implement on the ground a policy that aims to “eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in all spheres of human rights and promote basic rights like political, economic, and socio-cultural once in recognition of the equal rights of men and women” (qtd. in Rahman, “Gender Disaggregation” 259). Also, given the miniscule amount of the government’s budget allocated to

the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, this list appears as more of a wish list than anything else; there is no state mechanism in place that can implement and carry out these policies.

This then leads to a crucial question for my study: How can a state mechanism implement those policies, given the ways in which patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal imperialism continue to dominate the Bangladeshi state? But since 1997, a number of other policies have been drafted, such as the Prevention of Woman and Child Repression Act (2000), the Acid Attack Crime Repression Act (2002), and the ratification of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation convention on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution) (2000). However, all such acts and policies face the same problem, to begin with: without significant funding, they offer little more than lip-service to the issues they claim to address.

### **Women and Education**

Now, in terms of education, all of the five-year plans made by the Government of Bangladesh have emphasized the importance of education for women. As Mahmuda Islam argues in her essay “Women Look Forward,” most progress has been made in terms of women’s education at the primary level, but much less progress has been made in the area of women’s participation in secondary and higher education. The overall literacy rate of Bangladesh is 32.4 percent, with men registering at 38.9 percent and women at 25.5 percent (Khanam 61). And as Ayesha Khanam relates in her essay “Gender Equality and Women Empowerment,” the proportion of women students is significantly less in technical disciplines such as agriculture and

engineering—in three technical universities, for instance, women constitute only 12 percent of the students (Khanam 61). For most women in the rural areas, they are fortunate to complete their primary-level education, given the fact that among rural households, only about a quarter of total educational expenses are relegated to the education of girls, and given the fact that girls from poor households are likely to be married at a very young age.

### **Violence Against Women**

Just at the culvert-end a trapped corpse  
A woman's corpse  
It lies trapped, unable to let go  
Her face is turned towards her child  
Her face is turned towards her family  
Her face is turned towards her man  
That man who had battered her incessantly  
Her face is turned towards him.

Foolish, petulant, care-hungry face  
Even today it is turned towards life.

Just at the culvert-end a trapped corpse  
A woman's corpse  
It lies trapped, unable to let go.

—Krishna Basu, “A Woman’s Corpse”<sup>5</sup>

As we can see from the list of policies that have been drafted, violence against women continues to remain a serious problem. Women in Bangladesh face violence in the forms of physical and verbal abuse, acid throwing, trafficking, and—of course—the silent, apparently invisible, but powerful violence of day-to-day exploitation of their labor-power through domestic work and paid labor. Women and children are subject to trafficking within and across the borders of Bangladesh for prostitution either under coercion or false promises. Such trafficking also often

increases in times of natural disaster, as Rosie Ahsan and Mohammad Hossain assert.<sup>6</sup> Also, in “People’s Initiatives for a SAARC Convention Against Trafficking in Women and Children” (2000), for instance, Farida Akhter discusses the trafficking of Bangladeshi women and children to Pakistan and India as well as various countries in the Middle East:

The estimates from Bangladesh show that 200,000 women have been trafficked over a period of the last 10 years. According to the report published by UNICEF, an average of 4,500 women and children from Bangladesh are being smuggled to Pakistan in one year. Every month 120 to 150 Bangladeshi women are trafficked to Pakistan and sold to brothels or individuals, most of them are turned into prostitution [sic]. Every day over 50 women and children are reported to cross the land border areas and an estimated 5,000 women are trafficked with false promises of jobs and marriages. A UBINIG study shows that women are trafficked out to India for marriage to Indian men who find it difficult to marry for reasons of dowry payment. For example, in the Bangladeshi northern district of Chapainababganj, over 10,000 women have been trafficked to Lucknow, Firozabad and other places in India for this reason during the last 15 years. [...] There have been reports of Bangladeshi women and children being trafficked to U.A.E. and other countries of the Middle East for purposes such as bonded or illegal labour, camel jockeys or domestic aides. Most of these trafficked women are alleged to have been abused sexually and are forced to work as prostitutes. (211)

Akhter’s essay also discusses various strategies that women and human rights organizations in South Asia have formulated for combating the trafficking of women and children, and historicizes the emergence of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1996. As Akhter explains, SAARC’s priority concern was combating the crime of trafficking of women and children. When the Bangladesh government ratified the SAARC Convention in 2000—as I mentioned above—this opened up certain spaces within the public discourse, if nothing else, for attention to the critical problem of trafficking.

There are numerous other forms of violence against women in Bangladesh. Acid throwing is a relatively recent and particularly cruel type of violence against women, as it causes severe physical deformities and scars them for life, physically and emotionally. Such attacks are

most commonly perpetrated on poor women, and are associated with property disputes, refusals of marriage, with charges of adultery or with complaints of unsatisfactory dowry for marriage. For instance, in her poem “The Dowry” (*All About Women* 8-9), Taslima Nasreen writes these lines of the violence directed towards women—particularly poor women—whose family cannot pay their dowry:

To raise the dowry for his daughter’s marriage,  
Samiran Mandal sells his fields’ crops.  
Not enough.  
The house is sold.  
Not enough.  
‘The rest I will pay later, not now,’ he promises,  
and he marries his daughter off.

The bride is cursed every day,  
gets slaps and kicks,  
gets whipped:  
the flowers in her garden wither and fall,  
and only thorns blossom there.

A year has passed.  
Why don’t you pay the dowry, Samiran?  
‘It’s almost ready, just wait. Give me some more time.’

But there is no more time.  
The bridegroom hacks the bride to death  
because of the delay.  
Samiran, saying not one word,  
lowers his head in shame.

And for those women in such situations who are not brutally murdered, they are often the victim of acid attacks. From 1999 to 2009, for instance, there were over 2,300 reports of such attacks, according to the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF).<sup>7</sup> ASF was established in Bangladesh in 1999 for the purpose of increasing public awareness of this form of violence against women, and for assisting survivors of acid violence with medical treatment and legal advice. In “Acid

Violence and Medical Care in Bangladesh: Women's Activism as Carework," Afroza Anwar describes the brutality of this kind of violence:

Acid violence is a particularly vicious form of aggression against human beings. Sulfuric acid, thrown on a human body, causes skin tissue to melt, often exposing bones below the flesh, sometimes even dissolving the bones. Most attacks, made by men, are directed at the faces of young women to destroy their physical appearance (Swanson 2002). Recovering from the trauma takes considerable time and, because of the disfigurement, victims' psyches are debilitated, negatively affecting every aspect of their lives. Survivors of acid attacks experience social isolation, encounter great difficulty finding work, and if unmarried, lose the opportunity to marry. (306)

The hydrochloric or sulphuric acid used in such attacks can also cause blindness and deep facial scarring. Women who survive such attacks are socially ostracized and usually are unable to marry or find employment, given their disfigurement. As the Acid Survivors Foundation relates, the Bangladesh government enacted two new government laws in 2002 that limited the availability of corrosive substances such as acid and facilitated the prosecution of offenders. However, very few perpetrators of such attacks have been brought to justice, despite the fact that the victims most often know their attackers.

Women also remain subject to violence on multiple levels when it comes to sexual abuse and rape. Women and girls who have been raped are ostracized by their community, so often cases of rape and molestation go unreported. Yet these women face further violence, particularly if the rape results in pregnancy. In January 2010, for instance, a sixteen year-old girl from a village in Eastern Bangladesh was sentenced by village leaders to 101 lashes for becoming pregnant, despite the fact that her family and human rights activists stated that she had been raped.<sup>8</sup> When the rape occurred, she was too ashamed to come forward to report the incident. As newspaper reports indicated, the girl received the lashes in her family's front yard, and she lost

consciousness for two hours. The village officials made no attempt to verify the rape case or take action against the accused rapist because of the fact that he was from a different village. Now that violence has been doubly perpetrated on the girl, police officials said they would take action if she files charges. But given the fact that the police did nothing to intervene when village leaders beat her and rendered her unconscious, such support can hardly be called lip-service. This is just one recent example of a form of violence against women that occurs on a regular basis in Bangladesh, as it does elsewhere in this fully globalized world under patriarchal capitalism. And for women to speak out against rape as their own witness to violence perpetrated against them is not enough—they simply do not count as witnesses. A man must witness the act. Taslima Nasreen expresses this point in her poem, “Mokka – Modina” (*All About Women* 13-14):

Who had assaulted the two sisters, who had raped them?  
Jamir Mia pointed towards Matbor Ali.  
‘Bring witnesses, Jamir Ali,’ the Imam said in a cold voice.  
Jamir Mia looked at the villagers helplessly. Who would give evidence?  
No one except Mokka and Modina had seen it.

Without a witness, Jamir Mia fell at the feet of the Imam, pleading,  
‘Allah was the witness.’

This the Imam did not accept, Allah the witness?  
Mokka and Modina had lost their virtue, they were the guilty ones,  
and the verdict was a fine of five thousand taka.  
The Imam gave Jamir Mia but one week to pay the fine.  
If the fine was not paid, then two unchaste girls would be whipped 100 times each.  
‘Bravo, bravo!’ The gentlemen present in the meeting applauded.

A day labourer, Jamir Ali could not raise the money.  
Mokka and Modina were whipped,  
The whole Fultoly village watched the spectacle,  
Even Matbor Ali.

All the surprises of the world jumped on Mokka’s eyes,

‘But why were we punished, *Didi*, for what crime?’  
Modina always answered her questions somehow or other,  
from books, from strange fairy tales, from her mind.

For the first time, Modina stood dumb.

Furthermore, let me point out that the system in place for women to report abuse—even if they have male witnesses—is entirely corrupt and unreliable. There is always the chance, for instance, that if a woman reports to the police that she has been raped, that she could be subject to rape by the police. This has occurred in many instances. And another element to this is the extremely marginal role of the state in rural Bangladesh. In other words, in rural Bangladesh, the local village leaders and religious leaders have much more control over shaping and determining laws, punishment, and the processes for “justice” than even the state does. This is important to keep in mind when efforts are made to establish the laws at the state level. Such laws may have little to no impact on rural Bangladesh, given the current system.

Elora Shehabuddin discusses this issue at some length in *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*. Shehabuddin looks at the case of a young woman called Nurjahan from a village in the district of Sylhet in eastern Bangladesh. To summarize this story very quickly, as Shehabuddin describes it, in 1993 the young woman committed suicide by drinking agricultural pesticide after she was charged with adultery by the village elite and pelted with 101 stones as punishment. Her first husband—whom she married at a young age—had abused her for some time and then divorced her, but without registering the marriage or the divorce with the state. A number of the village elite men came to her father with marriage proposals, but her father decided that Nurjahan should marry another man (Mutalib) who wanted a second wife in order to help care for his first wife, who was chronically ill. The



elite men of the community—who were angry at being turned down by her father in their marriage proposals, and who were having property disputes with Nurjahan’s second husband—claimed that the marriage was illegal since she had not gotten the proper divorce paperwork from her first husband. They decided to use the shalish (a community-based, non-state dispute resolution system) to convict Nurjahan of adultery, and forced her and her new husband to stand in a pit while they were both pelted with stones. Her elderly parents were also given fifty lashes each for arranging the marriage with Mutalib.

Shehabuddin observes the way in which this story provides a clear example of the consequences that result from a weak state. (Had Nurjahan’s divorce and later marriage been officially registered with the state, for instance, she could have provided the necessary documents that would prove her second marriage was valid.) In Shahabuddin’s words, “[t]he limited reach of the state in Bangladesh has created a vacuum that has enabled secularist and Islamist forces, with financial support from international organizations, foreign governments, and Bangladeshi expatriate workers, to attempt to regulate society and poor women in accordance with their respective ideologies” (*Reshaping the Holy* 3). Shehabuddin observes, furthermore, that while secularists see the increasing Islamization of the state as the source of problems and Islamists see problems as stemming from a lack of “true” Islamic governance and institutions, both groups “share a condescending assumption about the gullability of the rural poor, especially women, and the overarching role of religion in their lives and decisions” (3).

A more subtle form of violence is found in the ways in which women’s lives are controlled on a daily basis. Women are generally not seen outside the sphere of the domestic, particularly in the case of poor women. However, women have become more visible in the work

force over the course of the last several decades as a result of the influx of industries in Bangladesh (such as garments) that have primarily relied on the “cheap” labor of poor women. In the rural areas, women who have received microcredit loans from the NGOs such as the Grameen Bank have also necessarily become more visible in the public sphere, for the simple fact that they must go to the NGO offices to fill out the paperwork, make payments on their loans, and so on. This increased visibility of women in the rural areas is not without its backlash. As Elora Shehabuddin relates in *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*, there are many instances of Muslim fundamentalists in the rural areas punishing, beating, or even killing women who they deem to be not properly following the Islamic rules of “purdah” by showing their faces in public. One of the leading groups who claim to have the authority to punish, beat, and even kill women in the name of enforcing Islamic law is the Jama‘at-i-Islami, the most influential Islamist political party in Bangladesh today.<sup>9</sup>

### **Health Care, Maternal Mortality Rates and Nutrition**

It is possible to have an abortion five times  
So the advertisement claims.  
Then why did she weep  
When she miscarried at six weeks?  
Why did her tender breasts  
Darken at the nipples?  
In the womb the bloody hand  
Eclipses the growth of a cuddly child  
O devil woman, you will not be spared  
The female foetus will return against  
And again and again you will return  
Anxious, to that putrid clinic.

— Vijaya Mukhopadhyay, “Advertisement”<sup>10</sup>

In regards to access to healthcare and medical facilities, women in Bangladesh suffer in a number of ways. The maternal mortality rate there is one of the highest in the world—Bangladesh’s 2007 *Demographic and Health Survey* revealed that approximately 21,000 mothers die annually due to childbirth or pregnancy-related causes (IRIN Asia, par. 6). And according to UNICEF’s 2008 *State of the World’s Children Report*, Bangladesh has the highest maternal mortality rate in South Asia. Despite all this, the budget for health allocated by the government is only 5.9% of the overall budget, while safe delivery practices make up less than a tenth of that amount (IRIN Asia, pars. 14-15).

Furthermore, most health programs allocated to women address family planning and population control, rather than the diverse healthcare needs of women. In the epigraph to this chapter, in fact, Gayatri Spivak argues that “the worst victim of the play of the multinational pharmaceuticals in the name of population control is the woman’s body” (“Teaching for the Times” 17). In the next chapter, I take up this question at some length, particularly the issue of how poor women in Bangladesh were exploited by multinational pharmaceuticals—with the help of the World Bank and USAID—as guinea pigs for trial runs of the Norplant implant and of the Dalkon Shield IUD, both forms of birth control that were found later to cause numerous severe and debilitating side effects and even death. Indeed, Bangladesh constitutes an exemplary site in which the gendered subaltern body—the body of the poor woman—is directly implicated in the networks of violence perpetrated by patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal imperialism, connected as they are.

The often unspoken but widely acknowledged rule is that baby boys are always better than baby girls—they will not require a dowry, and they offer a promise of future financial

security. While many doctors in Dhaka do not allow women to have ultrasounds in the early stages of pregnancy, given the fact that many choose abortion if they discover that the baby is a girl, still infanticide remains an ongoing problem. I would argue that to blame the mothers who make the unfortunate decision to kill their babies is to lose sight of the larger problem—that women face exploitation and oppression in so many ways, that many poor mothers simply do not wish this on their own baby daughters; this is their way of pushing back against such oppression and exploitation, of protecting their own children, a way of saying to the world that you may exploit me all my life, but not my daughter. Taslima Nasreen expresses this well in her poem, “The Poem of Sabita” (*All About Women* 4-5):

Sabita has thrown her newborn daughter from the sixth floor:  
shame, shame on you, Sabita,  
how cruel you are!  
Who could throw an innocent baby whose eyes were just opening,  
whose lips searched for some honey,  
some milk, some water,  
whose soft feather-like skin searched only for somebody’s warm touch?  
Thrown suddenly? What’s your heart made of—stone?  
Yes, stone. There are two black stones in Sabita’s eyes, too.  
Who says she is human? An out-and-out witch!  
Hundreds of street dogs have started a big feast with the smashed human meat.  
Shame, shame on you, Sabita!

Sabita is mad. Everybody declares it.  
See, the mad woman is looking at the sky, the way a poet looks at it.  
Sabita is not a poet, but today she has written a poem,  
contentment showing as she writes,  
For ever since childhood she has wanted to write a poem, a beautiful poem.  
Throwing her newborn daughter from the sixth floor  
was like writing a poem, a perfect poem;  
for had the daughter lived for fifty years,  
she would have suffered for fifty years,  
simply for being a woman.  
Sabita, see, loves her daughter more than she loves herself.  
She has written a beautiful poem

reducing her daughter's pain  
from fifty years to fifty minutes,  
not killing her daughter,  
but saving her.

It is for the well-being of others that people write poetry.

Now let me turn to another concrete issue plaguing women in Bangladesh. Adequate nutrition is also a critical problem for poor women. Numerous World Bank reports and NGO documents point to the fact that women's caloric intake—particularly that of poor women—remains substantially lower than men's. Such a severe deficiency in nutrients, particularly for pregnant and breastfeeding women, aggravates women's nutritional deficiencies and also leads to low birth weights or the death of infants. For the poor, the cost of infant formula (which is an imported commodity) is astronomical, and completely out of the question. So the adequate supply of the mother's milk—which requires a balanced diet and adequate rest—is a life-and-death question. As I've witnessed first-hand, cow's milk becomes a last resort for babies who are failing to thrive, despite the fact that it is not considered suitable for infants. For instance, the sister of a friend of mine—from a village in the northern district Rajshahi—gave birth to twins. She could not produce enough milk to satisfy both babies, so her family decided to purchase a milk cow for supplementing her breast milk. The cow was a form of constant milk production (as opposed to formula), and a form of security—the twins would at least not go hungry. Thus, the issue at hand is simultaneously the need for proper nutrition for mothers, the need for lactation support, and the need for access to affordable infant formula.

Also, the home delivery practices in rural Bangladesh—often without a trained midwife or nurse—result in a high maternal mortality rate. As evident in the very title of their essay—

“Home Delivery Practices in Rural Bangladesh: A Case of Passive Violence to the Women”—

Monirul Khan and Khaleda Islam argue that the lack of access to proper medical facilities in the rural areas of Bangladesh leads to the “passive violence” of unnecessary complications and death. Khan and Islam relate this story, for instance, of a young woman’s death at childbirth:

[A] very young girl whose name was Renubala met with a tragic end of her life when she failed to give a normal delivery of her child. She was a young girl of sixteen. One day at the close of her pregnancy cycle she felt pain in her lower abdomen. Her kin called a *Dhai* [traditional birth attendant] of the village who said that it was not a very serious case. But the traditional healer could not actually diagnose the case because after a few days when Renu was in the toilet one of the legs of the baby suddenly came out obstructing the process of normal delivery. The [...] case went out of control for the *Dhai* and Renubala succumbed to death. (6)

This story is representative of thousands of similar cases. It is not the *Dhai*, however, who is to be blamed ultimately. Traditional birth attendants in the villages have very limited medical training, and often provide the only available treatment for women in the rural areas; the larger issue, of course, is the simple lack of adequate health care available to poor women. A poem by Geeta Cahttopadhyay, entitled “Birth”:<sup>11</sup>

“Will you play with dolls anymore?”  
On the forehead he smeared a red mark  
“Will you venture across the threshold again?”  
The hands he bound with bangles of shell  
“Will you be late at the ghat?”  
The two feet were strongly outlined with alta.

And the pangs started then  
Inside the dark caverns of art.

And when it comes to reproductive labor and the family, women remain the primary caregivers for children, and while women play a major role in the maintenance of the household,

their power is extremely limited. The exploitation of women's labor-power remains fundamental to the family structure. For most poor women, their lives consist of serving their husbands and family from dawn to dusk, with little time for their own needs, medical or otherwise.

### **Women's Paid Labor**

In terms of paid labor, women's participation in the industrial sector continues to grow, particularly in export-oriented industries such as garments, electronics, and shrimp processing. Women make up nearly 24 percent of the total workers in the manufacturing sector, and the garment and shrimp processing industries employ the most women—over 90 percent of the total labor force in those industries are women (Khanam 62-63). The garment manufacturing sector is the largest employer of women, but also exploits women under extremely harsh working conditions, low wages, and few, if any, rights as workers. They are fired without notice if they become pregnant, if they try to organize any kind of a worker's union, or even if they miss work due to illness.

Stories have appeared in Bangladesh's national newspapers of garment workers even being lynched for taking home a t-shirt worth less than a dollar.<sup>12</sup> Thus the garment industry generates enormous revenue for multinational corporations, but offers very little to women in terms of class ascendancy or long-term careers. In their essay "Rags, Riches and Women Workers: Export-oriented Garment Manufacturing in Bangladesh," Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud put it thus:

[T]hese jobs do not provide a long-term solution to female poverty. The garment industry has been notoriously footloose in global terms and the impending phasing out of the MFA [Multifibre Arrangement] makes its future in Bangladesh extremely uncertain. Clearly, the capacity of the industry to continue to generate employment is tied up with its capacity to survive. But the jobs are also not sustainable from the perspective of individual women. Extremely long hours doing the same repetitive tasks with little or no prospect of promotion mean that few workers last more than five years in the industry. In any case, most women cannot continue to work these hours once they have children to look after. (154)

In her poem “Garment Girls” (*All About Women* 15-16), Taslima Nasreen writes of the exploitation of the labor-power of female garment workers, but also of their vulnerability, of the multiple ways in which they are harassed, threatened, and abused as they come to and from work:

They are walking together, the garment girls  
Who look like a flock of birds flying in Bangladesh’s sky.

The garment girls return to their slums at midnight;  
The street-vagabonds try to snatch a few taka from the tired, hungry girls;  
The pervy drunks try to push themselves  
Toward the girls’ bodies.  
The girls have everything to lose—what they have, what they haven’t—everything.

Spending a sleepless night, before dawn the girls again walk together.  
Watching them with watering mouths,  
Gentlemen of the city spit at the girls.  
The girls walk on, still walk on.  
They eat nobody’s food, wear nobody’s clothes, just walk on.

The garment girls are tied with the hard rope of the rich;  
They walk like blinkered bullocks,  
Keeping their noses to the grindstone of the rich.  
The rich get the oil, the girls get the trash,  
Unable ever to see the colour of the rainbow.  
Wrapping their bodies with darkness, the slum mafia men rape them,  
Girls who are never even able to bathe in the rays of the beautiful moon.

The garment girls are walking together,



Looking every bit like a flight of Bangladesh across the sky of the world.

From my own bedroom window at my in-laws' house, I could see directly into the garment factory next door in fact, and could observe how the women would work all hours of the day, only leaving for home late in the night.

Women are exploited in other industries as well, and also work in food processing, tea cultivation, handicraft production, local textiles, shoes, cosmetics, and as day laborers (brick breaking, street sweepers, construction workers, and other back-breaking and poor-paying jobs).

Another poem, "The Woman Breaking Bricks" (Taslima Nasreen, *All About Women* 18):

The woman, sitting on a sidewalk, is breaking bricks,  
The woman wearing a red sari is breaking bricks,  
Breaking bricks under the burning sun.  
On and on she goes, the bronze-coloured woman breaking bricks.  
Only twenty-one, she looks forty plus.  
Back home she has seven children.  
All day, the woman breaks bricks.  
At the end of the day the contractor will give  
Her ten taka for that, all told.  
Ten taka is not enough for her food, not enough for seven others.  
Still the woman breaks the bricks every day.  
Beside her, a man, under an umbrella is breaking bricks.  
He gets twenty taka every day,  
Double because he is a man.

Now, while class remains the fundamental factor in the given scenario—both the woman and the man are heavily exploited and the wages are something of a joke (the day's pay of ten taka is the current equivalent of fifteen cents; twenty taka is thirty cents)—the man receives more for his work. Inequalities in the labor force continue to impact women, as they face wage discrimination, longer working hours than men in equivalent positions. According to the Asian

Development Bank's country briefing paper, *Women in Bangladesh* (2001), in the informal labor market, women day laborers worked 75 percent more hours than their male counterparts per week, but received only about three-fifths of the wage paid to the men (13). Of course, other forms of paid labor—such as sexwork—do not show up on such reports. Sexwork and prostitution is also a form of extreme exploitation of the labor-power—rather, the reproductive labor-power—of poor women, and of *hijras*,<sup>13</sup> a group understood in Bangladesh to be “sexless” (neither male nor female).

The exploitation of the labor-power of women in Bangladesh is symptomatic of the fact that at this conjuncture, poor “third-world” women remain the major labor force for patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal imperialism in numerous ways. Linda Carty, in “Imperialism: Historical Periodization or Present-Day Phenomenon?,” argues the point that imperialism itself can be defined by the classed-raced-gendered international division of labor:

Imperialism is a “raced,” “classed,” and “gendered” praxis that exploits the labor of the men and women in the poor countries. At its present stage, it is characterized by the global assembly line, mass migration of labor and capital consolidation, the creation of free trade agreements and free trade zones to exploit the cheaper labor power of Third World peoples (the North American Free Trade Agreement being the most recent example), and the increasing pauperization of people of color around the world, whether they are located in the so-called First or Third Worlds. (41)

I argue, thus, that we must understand the ways in which poor women in Bangladesh have been inserted into the global economy through the exploitation of their labor-power—thus their exploitation is directly tied to the larger structures of unequal power-relations and production-relations inherent in capitalism and imperialism.

## In Review

While I have only been able to offer certain symptomatic instances of the status of women in Bangladesh, a fundamental point here is that women, and particularly poor women, in Bangladesh are subject to multiple forms of violence, oppression, and exploitation, and do in fact bear the largest brunt of oppression and exploitation that come as a direct result of the underdevelopment of Bangladesh. Indeed, the lines of the World Bank and other NGO documents tend to fix and freeze poor women as objects of oppression minus agency. In subsequent chapters, however, I discuss women's agency in a number of ways—through community organizing and activism, through literary and cultural productions, and through mass-movements. The Bengali feminist poet Taslima Nasreen speaks of agency in this way in her poem “You Go, Girl”<sup>14</sup>

They said—take it easy...  
Said—calm down...  
Said—stop talkin'...  
Said—shut up....  
They said—sit down....  
Said—bow your head...  
Said—keep on cryin', let the tears roll...

What should you do in response?

You should stand up now  
Should stand right up  
Hold your back straight  
Hold your head high...  
You should speak  
Speak your mind  
Speak it loudly

Scream!

You should scream so loud that they must run for cover.  
They will say—“You are shameless!”  
When you hear that, just laugh...

They will say—“You have a loose character!”  
When you hear that, just laugh louder...

They will say—“You are rotten!”  
So just laugh, laugh even louder...

Hearing you laugh, they will shout,  
“You are a whore!”

When they say that,  
just put your hands on your hips,  
stand firm and say,  
“Yes, yes, I am a whore!”

They will be shocked.  
They will stare in disbelief.  
They will wait for you to say more, much more...

The men amongst them will turn red and sweat.  
The women amongst them will dream to be a whore like you.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DEVELOPMENT RHETORIC IN BANGLADESH: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Many people forgot about the Norplant issue, but it is very symbolic for me of how American Imperialism is inserted under our skin and then is controlling our lives.

—Farida Akhter (personal communication, 27 Feb. 2010)

The attempt to integrate women into development, which began as a genuine effort by women to raise the issues of discrimination and inequality, is based on a number of false assumptions. First, that economic growth is synonymous with development and improved standards of living for all. Second, that women were *not* part of the postwar development process. Third, that all women want to be (and have the time to be) part of the international economy. Fourth, that economic growth and the aims of women's movements are compatible. And finally, that women in the developed world have progressed further than women in the Third World toward equality with men.

—Pam Simmons, “‘Women in Development’: A Threat to Liberation” (246)

#### **Development and Imperialism: Basic Connections**

In this chapter, I interrogate the development rhetoric in Bangladesh, particularly the rhetoric of two major development institutions: the Grameen Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). While these institutions approach the question of development in different ways, and with different tools, I argue that they are fundamentally linked on an ideological level—they both announce their aim as developmentalist in character. Second, while they both claim to work in the service of poor women in Bangladesh, they end up exploiting and oppressing poor women.

While the rhetoric of development manufactured and deployed by the Grameen Bank, USAID, and other development agencies claim to be progressive and even liberatory, upon a close rhetorical critique, the rhetoric in question is not only oppressive, but is tied to the agendas of patriarchal capitalism and patriarchal imperialism, such that their main purpose is to exploit the labor-power of women in the interest of profit. Of course, the rhetorical on its own is not everything, given the context of Bangladesh. These organizations have their actual programs and interventions that accompany and are accompanied by their rhetorical arsenals, thus enacting a dialectic between the rhetorical and the material. While, of course, I intend to undertake a rhetorical critique in this chapter, this critique, by no means, remains confined to the rhetorical only, but also makes connections between the rhetorical and the material.

The concept of development has been a key element in the discourse of the western world since the global economic system was restructured under the Bretton Woods agreement after the Second World War. The rhetoric of development espoused by the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO—the institutions to emerge from Bretton Woods—focuses on *helping* the poor rather than on doing away with poverty all together. At the risk of grossly simplifying global structures of power relations, this is the fundamental problem with the entire project of development: it simply does not change the system which has created the global inequalities we see today, as it remains inherently tied to imperialism. Walter Rodney puts it this way in his magnum opus *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*:

It is fairly obvious that capitalists do not set out to create other capitalists, who would be rivals. On the contrary, the tendency of capitalism in Europe from the very beginning was one of competition, elimination, and monopoly. Therefore, when the imperialist stage was reached, the metropolitan capitalists had no

intention of allowing rivals to arise in the dependencies. (216)

And I cannot help but rehearse the famous statement made by the Brazilian priest Dom Hélder Câmara: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.” When it comes to the project of development, my argument is a simple one: it will never be possible to do away with poverty in the third world without radical systemic change that would dismantle imperialism and capitalism. The enactment of such change, of course, is anything but simple. In *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered*, Lordes Benería argues the case for development from below; as she puts it, “the objective should be to do away with poverty by enabling the poor to find their own solutions and by recognizing their right to be fully integrated in the collective processes of human development” (xv).

Such a development-from-below perspective has been made in a number of ways since Bretton Woods. Also, the very idea of “development” as an organizing principle by which to structure Third World countries has been met with all kinds of resistances and challenges, tracing back to the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah’s coinage of the term “neo-colonialism” in 1965 to describe Ghana’s subservient relationship with Britain after independence<sup>1</sup>. (Ghana became the first African colony to win its independence.) Nkrumah argued that neocolonialism was nothing short of the American stage of colonialism—an empire without colonies: “Neo-colonialism is . . . the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress” (*Neo-Colonialism* xi).

Furthermore, Nkrumah pushed back against liberal frameworks that articulated the

benefits of investment in “underdeveloped” countries. The term “underdeveloped” itself implies the necessity of development. Lenin has famously argued, however, that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism. And Nkrumah has argued from a Leninist perspective that “[t]he result of neocolonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investments under neocolonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world” (*Neo-Colonialism* x). This is similar to the arguments made by the dependency theorists such as Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and the early Wallerstein.<sup>2</sup>

Since Nkrumah’s initial articulation of the relationship between the western world and—in his words—the “so-called Third World,”<sup>3</sup> postcolonialism has brought with it a whole host of theories to define the global power structure. In *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Robert Young defines rather succinctly the concept of postcolonialism and the range of theories that have emerged as a result, both from the left and from the capitalist class:

[T]he postcolonial is *post*, that is, coming after, colonialism and imperial in its first sense of domination by direct rule. It is not, however, *post* to imperialism in the second sense, that is of a general system of a power relation of economic and political domination. Since the initiation of this second system after the Second World War, there have been all sorts of variations of theorizations of this power relation and how to resist or transform it: from the left, neocolonialism, dependency theory, world systems theory, or, from the capitalist side, Keynesianism, monetarism, neoliberalism. (44)

Furthermore, Young articulates the relationship between these theorizations and the concept of development itself:

The concept that functioned as a form of mediation between them was that of ‘development’: it was ‘development’ that was generally seen as the way forward after the successful realization of the anti-colonial struggles. It was only development which put tricontinental societies in the position of some form of economic agency; the failure of



development projects in their original form in many areas of the world has led to a reassessment of its underlying assumptions which has begun to draw on the ideas of postcolonial critique. For development theory did not take on board the fundamental lessons of the Marxism of the liberation movements that have been central to postcolonialism. The foundational concept here is the critique of eurocentrism and unreflective eurocentric assumptions, and the need to radicalize any politics or economics through constructive dialogue to accommodate the particularities of local cultural conditions. (44-45)

Young's very quick assessment here gets to the heart of the difference between the approach of development theory and that of liberation movements in the Third World that had the goal of independence from colonialism. As Young indicates, development projects have undergone a number of changes as they pick up ideas of postcolonial critique, and the concept of development itself has seen many transformations. Now, the predominant discourse is that of "postdevelopment" theory.

### **Development Theory and Postdevelopment Theory: What does the "Post" Mean?**

It may well be said that when the 'national' leaders of various anti-colonial struggles took over the movements emerging from the grassroots, they succeeded in making them believe that development was the best answer to their demands. As such, for all the victims of colonial rule, it did appear for a while as a promising mirage: the long-awaited source of regeneration to which they had been looking for so long. But the mirage ultimately transformed into a recurring nightmare for millions. As a matter of fact, it soon appeared to them that development had been, from the beginning, nothing but a deceitful mirage. It had acted as a factor of division, of exclusion and of discrimination rather than of liberation of any kind. It had mainly served to strengthen the new alliances that were going to unite the interests of the post-colonial foreign expansionists with those of the local leaders in need of them for consolidation for their own positions. Thanks to those alliances, societies that had invented modernized poverty could now extend it to all 'developing' countries.

—Majid Rahnema, "Introduction," *The Post-Development Reader* (x)

What is postdevelopment theory, and how does it differ from development theory? In

many ways, *postdevelopment* theory could be just as well described as *anti-development* theory, not that it is opposed to the very basic idea of a sustainable development for all, but in the sense that it has emerged in direct opposition to mainstream development theory. The collection of essays entitled *The Post-Development Reader*, edited by Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree, captures some of the fundamental aspects of post-development theory, a theory which basically argues that the development paradigm does little to dismantle unequal global power relations and, in fact, consolidates them. Thus, the argument within post-development circles is that new paradigms of global emancipation are needed, as development discourses and projects simply fail to empower or liberate the poor within third-world countries. Pam Simmons, for instance, argues in her essay “‘Women in Development’: A Threat to Liberation” that strategic alliances between women’s groups will likely lead to more productive change than anything that is a product of the development industry. She writes:

Alliances between women’s groups, such as the ones formed to combat sex tourism, or the abuse of reproductive technologies, may do much more towards securing respect and equality for women (in both hemispheres of the globe) than will hundreds of women’s projects devised by the development industry. These alliances are formed, not through the established channels of Third World aid and assistance, but by way of personal contact between groups or individuals. One approach is based on superiority and authority, the other on recognition of a mutual oppression. (235)

In other words, Simmons claims that a development paradigm is profoundly insufficient and even counter-productive for such transnational alliance work. This is, in other words, a “postdevelopment” argument.

Now, there are various streams within the discourse of postdevelopment. In an article published in *Third World Quarterly*, “The Ambivalence of Post-Development: Between Reactionary Populism and Radical Democracy,” Aram Ziai points to two such variants within

post-development thought: “a skeptical and a neo-populist one” (1045). Ziai argues that the neo-populist post-development has been rightly interpreted “as a cynical legitimation of neoliberalism or a futile romanticisation of premodern times” (1045) with reactionary political consequences, at best. However, Ziai contends that this does not characterize all of post-development thought, and that the “skeptical” version of post-development “uses elements of postmodern and post-Marxist theory and can best be described as a manifesto of radical democracy in the field of development studies” (1045). It is this second, “skeptical” version of post-development thought that I am interested in exploring here, to see the ways in which it articulates theories of radical democracy. Books such as *The Violence of Development* by Karin Kapadia or *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, edited by Kriemild Saunders, represent this approach to post-development, I would argue.<sup>4</sup>

Another scholar who engages the concept of “postdevelopment”—minus the hyphen—is Arturo Escobar. In *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Escobar challenges the very common-sense notion of development as an inevitable process. One of his fundamental arguments is that “[r]eality, in sum, has been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed” (5). Indeed, Escobar thinks about development in terms of discourse, arguing such a perspective “makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination—as earlier Marxist analyses, for instance, did—and at the same time to explore more fruitfully the conditions of possibility and the most pervasive effects of development” (5-6).

Escobar draws on Foucault, arguing that “Foucault’s work on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality, in particular, has been instrumental in unveiling the mechanics by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible” (5). While I have problematized Foucault’s attention to microsites of power, at the expense of the macro-systems, such as capitalism and imperialism, I agree with Escobar’s observation here that Foucault has provided some critical tools for discourse analysis. And, as Escobar contends, the extensions of Foucault’s insights to situations in the postcolonial world by authors like Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, Chandra Mohanty, and Homi Bhabha, among others, has allowed for new ways of critiquing discourse about and representations of the Third World.<sup>5</sup>

Now, when Escobar talks of “postdevelopment,” he means something along the lines of Ziai’s “skeptical” version of post-development that I discussed above, one that offers an alternate vision of radical democracy:

Urged by the need to come up with alternatives—lest they be swept away by another round of conventional development, capitalist greed, and violence—the organizing strategies of [popular] groups begin to revolve more and more around two principles: the defense of cultural difference, not as a static but as a transformed and transformative force; and the valorization of economic needs and opportunities in terms that are not strictly those of profit and the market. The defense of the local as a prerequisite to engaging with the global; the critique of the group’s own situation, values, and practices as a way of clarifying and strengthening identity; the opposition to modernizing development; and the formulation of visions and concrete proposals in the context of existing constraints, these seem to be the principal elements for the collective construction of alternatives that these groups seem to be pursuing. (225-226)

I also envision such a radical democracy as an alternative full of potential and possibilities. But I would argue that mainstream development discourse—the kind of discourse that remains

dominant in the context of Bangladesh—is antithetical to such a radical democracy, given the fact that it is dependent on the unequal power-relations and production-relations inherent in global capitalism. By enacting a rhetorical critique of certain influential texts within the development community, we can readily see examples of these basic contradictions. For instance, the notion of “freedom” in development rhetoric is a case in point, particularly as it has been articulated by the development theorist Amartya Sen.

### **Development Rhetoric and Notions of “Freedom”**

Amartya Sen, the recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, has contributed a great deal to development rhetoric. In his book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), for instance, Sen argues that “human freedoms” should be the primary goal of development:

Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization. Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can, of course, be very important as *means* to expanding the freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny). [. . .] Viewing development in terms of expanding substantive freedoms directs attention to the ends that make development important, rather than merely to some of the means that, inter alia, play a prominent part in the process. (3)

Sen’s notion of human freedoms does expand a narrow view of development, and allows for the consideration of many more factors than are usually taken into account in the domain of either NGO discourses or in standard development theories. However, Sen’s own framework shows a problematic gap that has to do with the lack of attention to how capitalism as a global system of power-relations and production-relations affects individuals and their freedoms at various levels.

For instance, although he talks about facilities for education and health care, and political and civil rights—necessary as they are for individual freedom—he does not talk about how such facilities are unevenly distributed, not just as arbitrary phenomenon, but as a function of capitalism.

In other words, Sen fails to theorize how it is capitalism as a system that makes the unequal distribution of resources, rights, opportunities and freedoms not only possible, but turns it into a structural necessity. One might argue that Sen even takes capitalism for granted as the only viable economic system, one that does not need any rupturing, but might need, at best, certain reforms—reforms that, however, strengthen the capitalist system itself, while making exploitation at least relatively invisible beneath the veneer of the rhetoric of freedoms, the rhetoric which is not so distant from the rhetoric of free-market economy on which capitalism itself relies for its global functioning.

Indeed, Samir Amin, in *Liberal Virus*, brings up the question of liberal arguments—the kinds advanced by Amartya Sen and theorists of his persuasion—suggesting that they tactfully and rhetorically obscure and mystify and thus justify the multi-layered processes of capitalist exploitation. Now, if we pit Samir Amin’s analysis of capitalism and liberalism against Amartya Sen’s notion of development as freedom, it becomes clear how Sen’s framework is both liberal and individualist. I have hitherto critiqued such liberal-individualist frameworks so as to clear the space for looking rigorously into the rhetoric of development obtaining and operating in Bangladesh. Now, let us examine how gender has been inserted into the rhetoric of development on a broader scale, particularly in terms of the notions of “Women in Development,” “Women and Development,” and “Gender and Development.”

## **Is There an Elephant in the Room?: The Problems with WID/WAD/GAD and Developmentalist-Imperialist Feminism**

Women are rarely treated as knowing what they need; rather, agencies seek to think and act on their behalf. Either women's needs and priorities are subsumed (and then forgotten) within those of the household collectivity or, when they are addressed separately, they tend to fall in the category of women's practical gender needs as mothers, wives and carers within the family.

—Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (230)

Women have been the focus in much of development discourse since the 1970s within the framework of “Women in Development” (WID), followed by “Women and Development” (WAD), while “gender” has been the predominant category of analysis in more recent years with the newest paradigm, “Gender and Development” (GAD). In *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, the Bengali feminist scholar Naila Kabeer historicizes this emergence of women as a constituency in development. Kabeer argues that a fundamental text that shaped the discourse surrounding women in development is Ester Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970). Kabeer highlights the ways in which the feminist movements of the 60s set the stage for increased attention to women in development in the 70s. Kabeer writes:

WID emerged in the 1970s, not because women had been totally ignored by policymakers in the first decade of development, but rather because they had been brought into development policy on very sex-specific terms. In other words, while men entered the policy process as household heads and productive agents, women were viewed primarily in their capacity as housewives, mothers and ‘at-risk reproducers’ (Jaquette and Staudt, 1988). Consequently, mainstream ‘development’ efforts were

targeted mainly at the male population, while women were regulated to the more marginal 'welfare' sector. (*Reversed Realities* 5)

Kabeer further argues that previous assumptions—like the “trickle-down” theory for GNP (that GNP was an adequate measure of development and the benefits would trickle down to the poor)—had been invalidated by the First Decade of Development. Kabeer makes an argument that I do not fully agree with, however, when she writes:

[W]e cannot *afford* to ignore the official agencies of development. Women all over the world face a critical shortage of resources to meet their own needs and their families' needs, and the official agencies remain powerful mechanisms of resource allocation, potentially capable of meeting or exacerbating this deprivation. Whatever our final vision of a society organized on feminist principles, we still need transitional strategies to bridge the present and the future. We need a more complex strategy than one of militant disengagement with official development efforts. In this context, a gender-relations analysis offers a more nuanced view of official policymaking institutions because it draws attention to the rules, relations and practices through which institutions are constituted. (Kabeer, *Reversed Realities* 67)

Given the shift in attention to Women in Development, then, according to Kabeer, there are two areas in which women's roles in development are given heightened attention: 1) food and 2) population control. Family planning efforts did not lead to a decrease in birth rates in the third world. Kabeer writes: “the limitations of this approach were partly explained by micro-level social science research suggesting that improving the supply of family planning methods was unlikely to have much impact on birth rates if the conditions that led to the demand for large families remained unchanged” (4). The pivotal studies that made this argument included Mahmood Mamdani's *The Myth of Population Control* (1972)—and T. Epstein and Darrell Jackson's edited collection, *The Feasibility of Fertility Planning: Micro Perspectives* (1977). The basic finding of such studies, in other words, was that poverty remained the root cause of high birth rates rather than lack of access to birth control. However, given the fact that such



findings were not products of the movers and shakers of development planning in the third world, namely the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, such studies were not “heard” at the center of the power/knowledge nexus. Thus, through the 1980s, the dominant—and dominating—research on food and population control continued on its course of establishing the conceptual link between women’s issues (of course, defined primarily as issues relating to food and family planning) and economic development.

Within development discourse, the focus on increasing the use of birth control in third world countries as the primary “development” issue pertaining to women has been ongoing, although the term “population control” has been outmoded in favor of the term “reproductive health,” a result of the shift in the discourse through the Women in Development (WID) model. In particular, long-term surgical birth control methods such as female hormone methods in the form of intrauterine devices (IUDs) and implants have been widely distributed by pharmaceutical companies in third world countries such as Bangladesh, via USAID. These methods tend to be less safe than the barrier methods of birth control such as diaphragms and cervical caps; some forms of long-term female hormone methods come with serious side effects (infections, excessive bleeding during menstruation, swelling, itching, blindness) and even death. But when it comes to reproduction and reproductive choice, “safety” for poor women in the third world is usually understood by the pharmaceutical community and by the development community in extremely limited ways, primarily in terms of unwanted pregnancy.

In other words, a critical element that is missing in the discourse surrounding birth control and reproductive choice—as Naila Kabeer puts it—is “*reproductive safety*” (*Reversed*

*Realities* 208). Kabeer discusses the studies conducted by of Naripokkho, a women's organization in Bangladesh, which found through its discussions with family-planning officials and health officials that "notions of risk and safety are often used in the official discourse to apply to the likelihood of pregnancy associated with contraceptive failure rather than to the effects on women's health from its use" (*Reversed Realities* 208). This gap in the discourse of reproductive health is not due to a lack of knowledge—rather, it has to do with profit. For instance, surgical methods of birth control are much more profitable for pharmaceutical companies than other methods. Also, research related to such hormonal methods of birth control tend to garner higher prestige within the medical community. Thus, such methods continue to be used, with the justification that poor women in third world countries need long-term solutions for birth control other than sterilization, and that birth control pills remain ineffective for most poor women because of the daily commitment required.

It is worth pointing out the racist and imperialist assumptions implicit in such arguments on several levels. First, the assumption is that poverty is the result of overpopulation—in other words, poor women are to blame for their own poverty, due to the high birth rate. Second, it is assumed that poor women cannot be responsible for their own bodies—if they are not willing to undergo sterilization, they must be subject to long-term surgical forms of birth control rather than safer forms that remain within their own control. Third, since poor third-world women will live short lives anyway, it is not unethical to use them as guinea pigs for new forms of birth control still under trial in the first world. In fact, there has been a long history of pharmaceuticals using the third world as testing grounds for new forms of birth control. Naila Kabeer briefly reviews this history thus:

[T]he [pharmaceutical] industry has frequently tried out new methods of contraception on the population of Third World countries before such methods have passed safety regulations in the First World. Thus, in the early 1970s, USAID was accused of ‘dumping’ high estrogen (higher risk) pills, which had been obtained at low prices from their manufacturers, on the population of Third World countries. Depo-Provera, an injectable, hormonal contraceptive manufactured by a US firm, has high rates of dissemination in large numbers of Third World countries. However, its use is restricted to specific categories of women in Sweden, West Germany and the UK, and banned in the United States where studies of its effects on humans are deemed insufficient to confirm or refute the risk of cancer. More recently, Norplant (encapsulated hormones inserted under the skin of the arm, which prevent pregnancy for at least five years) have also been promoted in the Third World before having been approved in the United States and some other European countries. (*Reversed Realities* 208-209)

I want to focus in on the ways in which the U.S. has had a direct role to play in the promotion and distribution of Norplant in Bangladesh, and the imperialist, racist, and even eugenicist implications of such actions.

**“Family Planning” and the Reproductive Rhetoric of USAID: Norplant Trials and the Eugenicist-Racist Colonization of Women’s Bodies**

When I went to complain about the health problems I was suffering from (severe bleeding) I told them, please take it [the Norplant birth control capsule] out, otherwise I will die. I was told by the family planning doctor in the centre: “O.K., let us know when you die, then we will go to remove the method. Now we cannot remove it. We told you that there will be possible side-effects. You accepted the method, knowing all this.”

—A recipient of Norplant in Gazaria Thana, Bangladesh  
(qtd. in Akhter, *Resisting Norplant* 101)

It is possible to have an abortion five times  
So the advertisement claims.  
The why did she weep  
When she miscarried at six weeks?  
Why did her tender breasts  
Darken at the nipples?  
In the womb the bloody hand

Eclipses the growth of a cuddly child  
O devil woman, you will not be spared  
The female foetus will return against  
And again and again you will return  
Anxious, to that putrid clinic.  
— Vijaya Mukhopadhyay, “Advertisement”<sup>6</sup>

USAID has been a major player in the development discourse in Bangladesh, coming up with yearly reports and plans for how to go about “developing” Bangladesh. On its main website for Bangladesh, USAID outlines its most current major goals for assistance to Bangladesh thus:

American assistance to Bangladesh includes support for free, fair, and credible elections and more transparent and accountable governance; support for a better educated, healthier, and more productive population; and resources to increase economic opportunities through equitable economic growth, improved food security, and disaster mitigation. (USAID, “Bangladesh” par. 1)

USAID articulates these goals in its 2005 “Country Strategic Statement,” which explains its goals and projects in Bangladesh for 2006-2010. The overall vision of USAID/Bangladesh, as the “Country Strategic Statement” indicates, “supports a broad programmatic vision to reduce poverty by promoting democratic institutions and practices, improving the quality of life and expanding economic opportunities for the people of Bangladesh” (1). Their three main goal areas, then, are “democracy and human rights; economic prosperity; and investing in human capital” (1).

Let’s now examine the question of human rights *vis-à-vis* USAID, particularly the rights of women to have control over their own bodies. For over a decade—from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, USAID was directly involved in implementing the use of Norplant (a contraceptive implant injected into the arm) and the Dalkon Shield (an IUD) in Bangladesh, despite their

knowledge that such contraceptives had not yet been adequately tested nor approved by the FDA as safe forms of contraception. Such forms of birth control were marketed as long-term yet reversible alternatives to sterilization that would be much less painful than sterilization and require no recovery time. This project was enacted in collaboration with the Bangladesh government, although the power-relations were not equal—USAID and the World Bank put a tremendous amount of pressure on the government and coerced it to substantially increase population control efforts.

But the website for USAID/Bangladesh— particularly the section devoted to family planning—offers no indication whatsoever that USAID has been involved in a massive project of coercive violence against poor women in Bangladesh in the name of reproductive health, essentially using Bengali women as guinea pigs for testing birth control. On the contrary, the section of USAID/Bangladesh’s website entitled “Current Conditions: Population and Health” is celebratory of its own accomplishments, and claims that “over the past three decades health indicators have improved dramatically” (par. 1). In USAID’s brief overview of its own involvement in family planning practices in Bangladesh since the late 1970s,<sup>7</sup> the organization advances two basic messages, one a message of self-praise for its apparent accomplishments and the other a message which advocates for increased population control in Bangladesh as a method for improving health and decreasing poverty:

Twenty years ago, many experts claimed the nation’s conservative culture and low standard of living would be insurmountable obstacles to family planning and child survival programs in Bangladesh. However, over the past three decades health indicators have improved dramatically.

In Bangladesh contraceptive use among currently married couples increased from 8% in the mid 1970’s to 56% in 2007. This resulted in a significant decline in fertility

from 6.3 to 2.7 children per woman over the same period. However, recent findings from the 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey show that contraceptive use rate has not improved in the past 3 years. Bangladesh's goal to reach a fertility level of 2 children per woman or below will require contraceptive use to increase substantially over the current use rate.

[...] Bangladesh's huge population size, extreme population density and high levels of poverty impose significant challenges to sustain the successes achieved in health. The recent plateau in contraceptive use, if it continues to persist, will be a major setback for limiting the country's population growth and stabilizing its population size. (pars. 1-2 & 5)

Through rhetorical critique of this passage, we can see the following underlying assumptions: 1) the poor are to blame for their own poverty; 2) in order to improve the quality of health for people in Bangladesh, it is necessary to reduce the population size; 3) contraceptives are the most appropriate means for population control; 4) the poor cannot be trusted to care for their own needs; they require external "assistance" from first world donors.

Farida Akhter, however, has extensively documented the coercion and violence perpetrated on poor women in Bangladesh through the unethical "reproductive health" programs enacted by USAID. Her two books—*Depopulating Bangladesh: Essays on the Politics of Fertility* (1992) and *Resisting Norplant: Women's Struggle in Bangladesh Against Coercion and Violence* (1995)—include intensive research on the ground in the form of case studies, facts and statistics, and a number of interviews and conversations with poor women who have been subject to such population control programs euphemized as programs for reproductive health. It is no surprise that these two slim, yet explosively charged volumes—published by Narigrantha Prabartana (The Feminist Bookstore) in Bangladesh—have seen little global circulation, and certainly have received no attention from global financial institutions that control and dictate development policies such as the World Bank, given the fact that they provide direct evidence

and empirical data documenting the violence against women perpetrated by USAID and its subsidiaries in Bangladesh.

I would argue, however, that the actions of USAID in third-world countries such as Bangladesh should be critically relevant to the field of American studies, especially when USAID enacts what amounts to eugenics in the form of birth control. In fact, in *Depopulating Bangladesh: Essays on the Politics of Fertility*, Farida Akhter herself characterizes the population control programs initiated and funded by USAID as a case of eugenics and racism, while she also makes connections to similar eugenicist-racist population control programs perpetrated on poor women of color in the first world by drawing on the work of Angela Davis.

Now, let me review the role of USAID in such population control programs. In USAID/Bangladesh's own document, *A Women in Development Implementation Plan for USAID/Bangladesh* (1987)—prepared by Marguerite Berger and Martin Greeley—there is a dangerous conflation of the maternal mortality rate and fertility. This document describes the \$175 million “Family Planning and Health Services Project” that USAID was in the process of implementing in Bangladesh in 1987: “The project’s goal is to reduce current high levels of fertility and mortality that restrain the attainment of rapid and sustained development in Bangladesh” (26). (The implication here is that these third-world women need to stop making babies if they want to be more “developed.”) Curiously, the document also emphasizes health care for mothers and children as a priority of the project. This aspect of the project simply did not come into fruition, as Farida Akhter and Betsy Hartman both document. Wherever USAID established health centers, they were for the exclusive purpose of distributing birth control and

not used for other health concerns of mothers or children.

In another report on USAID's project in Bangladesh produced in this period, "An Overview of Women's Roles and USAID Programs in Bangladesh" (1986), E. Boyd Wennergren and Morris D. Whitaker—who, at the time of publication, were both professors in Utah State University's Department of Economics—argue that USAID's "family planning" programs "primarily assist women to achieve greater control over their reproductive lives by increasing contraceptive use" (13). However, Betsy Hartmann documents the actions of USAID in Bangladesh in *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*, and comes up with quite a different narrative.<sup>8</sup> As Hartmann argues, it is not as if women in Bangladesh do not want access to birth control or family planning facilities. But poor women in rural villages asked for more than simply birth control:

All sides acknowledge that a latent demand for family planning existed in any case. The village women I lived with wanted access to birth control, but they also wanted access to health care, education, and other opportunities. A primary health system which offered voluntary family planning as only one of its components would have met their needs far better than the aggressive and often coercive sterilization program that was put into place. How can the Bangladesh program be considered a great success, indeed an exportable model, when it was built over the dead bodies of millions of people denied access to the most rudimentary forms of health care? This may sound like a hyperbole, but it is not. (240)

In *Resisting Norplant*, Akhter makes some important observations regarding how USAID functions in third-world countries such as Bangladesh. To begin with, for instance, USAID can obscure its own involvement in a population control program quite easily because of its multiple avenues of funding: "The United States is represented more than it apparently is, because most of the international agencies like UNFPA, IFRP, IPPF, and Pathfinder Fund are funded by USAID"



(Akhter, *Resisting Norplant* 19). Secondly, USAID was able to distribute contraceptives like Norplant, Depo-Provera, and the Dalkon Shield in Bangladesh and other third-world countries, despite the fact that such contraceptives were not approved for use by the FDA. Akhter puts it thus: “when there is a rule that USAID cannot supply the drugs to other countries which are not approved by the FDA for domestic use, they have a way to get the appropriate supplies to foreign countries through some other routing” (*Resisting Norplant* 19).

Furthermore, USAID is able to bypass ethical questions pertaining to the use of these contraceptives by carefully wording its official documents, and by using other organizations as fronts for advertising. They marketed Norplant on a “trial basis” in Bangladesh in their official reports (*Resisting Norplant* 20), which was certainly the case, given the fact that it had not yet gone through the standard procedures for testing and approval by the FDA. However, USAID relied on the Bangladesh Fertility Research Program (BFRP) as the frontrunner for advertising Norplant in Bangladesh, and in their advertisements, BFRP did not mention anything about Norplant being on trial. Akhter writes: “The recent advertisement for the contraceptive by Bangladesh Fertility Research Program (BFRP) has raised confusion among people because it describes Norplant as ‘a wonderful scientific innovation’ and does not say that ‘it is still on trial.’ BFRP is a branch of IFRP which is funded by USAID” (20).

Indeed, as Akhter has documented, the thousands of poor women in Bangladesh who were recipients of the Norplant contraceptive—many of whom were bribed with cash or even coerced into using it—were not informed that it was on trial or that it had not yet been approved by the U.S. FDA. Furthermore, they were also not given proper follow-up care or even allowed

to remove the Norplant implant if they suffered serious side effects, despite the doctors' initial assurances that the women could easily have the implants removed if they did experience debilitating side-effects. And given the fact that Norplant was inserted through a surgical procedure, the doctors alone had control over whether the contraceptive would be removed. But the doctors remained hostile to such removal requests.

Why would USAID choose to cover up such critical information about Norplant? The simple answer is profit: USAID had formed a profitable alliance with pharmaceutical companies engineering the product who needed human guinea-pigs who would for initial testing, before FDA approval and subsequent mass-production in the U.S. In her letter to the director of the population section of USAID, Farida Akhter addressed this gross abuse thus:

Our research on the Bangladesh "trials" of this implant has uncovered gross violations of ethics and an inadequate research practice. Women who are suffering from serious side-effects such as excessive bleeding are not receiving follow-up study, let alone care. It became clear in the study that these trials were not set up to study the safety aspect of Norplant, but rather, to increase the number of "research subjects" showing only positive results. Research in other developing countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and Thailand has uncovered similar abuses. (*Resisting Norplant* 86)

The resistance to Norplant in Bangladesh gave rise to the policy research organization UBINIG, an organization that was formed in 1984. Farida Akhter herself takes active part in this organization. This organization was founded on a simple question: "Why are we poor? Is it because we have too many people?" (*Resisting Norplant* 134). (The collective answer was a resounding "no.") The organization sought to document the deplorable treatment of poor women in the USAID-funded Norplant trials, while it also brought such concerns to the international stage. The group wrote letters to President Clinton, to Hilary Clinton, to influential U.S. senators

who remained sensitive to women's reproductive health, and to the head of USAID, asking them to stop the unethical Norplant trials in Bangladesh, but to no avail.

In 1985, members of UBINIG participated in forming the Feminist International Network for Resistance Against Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE), a network with members from Brazil to Indonesia. This international network brought members of UBINIG into contact with women from other third-world countries facing the same racist-eugenicist "family planning" practices imposed by USAID and other first-world agencies, while it also brought international attention to the plight of poor women in Bangladesh being used as guinea-pigs for USAID and pharmaceutical companies.<sup>9</sup>

Now, when we think of international feminist solidarity, it is important for Western feminists to recognize the ways in which their own arguments may have significant limitations and blind spots. Farida Akhter, for instance, criticizes western feminists who are uncritical of their own complicity in the discourse and structure of eugenicist, racist population control programs perpetrated on poor women in the third world by the World Bank and USAID:

In the fourth Interdisciplinary Congress on Women held in Hunter College, New York, USA in 1990, I was surprised to hear the proposition of a "feminist population control policy." If it is population control, it is already based on eugenic, racist, sexist and exploitative actions against a certain race and class of people. How would feminists take part in such an exploitative policy? Can there be any "feminist policy on exploitation"? Can there be a "feminist policy of racism or race purification"? Can there be any "feminist policy on war"? The answer is very simple. There cannot be any because feminism to me is to fight against the existing world-patriarchal structure, against racism, against all kinds of exploitation. A population "control" policy formulated by feminists would not be different from those formulated by the World Bank and USAID. (*Depopulating Bangladesh* 48-49)

Such blind-spots must be continuously challenged and questioned, in fact. There are also certain blind spots in western feminist discourse surrounding the apparently “empowering” quality of micro-credit.

## **VI. The Grameen Bank and Micro-Credit**

NGOs provide employment [in Bangladesh]; they do not generate employment. It is not that kind of process. [...] It exploits the situation of unemployed youths in our country and creates conditions that do not allow for other forms of recruitment, political recruitment, for example, from occurring. To rural people, they (NGOs) preach a kind of economism instead of a political progressive consciousness. Their goal is the extension of credit instead of industrial development. In this way, political outlook is hijacked. Rural people say to us, political party organizers, “NGOs give us money, what will you give us?” When I go to the villages, I tell people I cannot give you money or loans. I can tell you of ways in which you can improve your conditions. That’s not much anymore. People are now disinterested in hearing such talk.

—Badrudin Umar (qtd. in Karim, “Politics of the Poor” 100)

Now let’s examine the function of micro-credit in Bangladesh, and the ways in which problematic notions of “freedom” are embedded within the rhetoric of development agencies that capitalize on micro-credit, particularly the Grameen Bank. Bangladesh has been globally recognized in the past few years, given the fact that Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his micro-credit loan system in the Grameen Bank. I was, in fact, in Bangladesh at the time, and watched the euphoria that some people exhibited over the Peace Prize that Yunus received. But I would argue that peace prizes can actually work to uphold hegemony. Let me explain. To simplify the micro-credit process immensely, if the Grameen Bank gives a small loan at a high interest rate to a poor woman in Bangladesh, just enough so that her family can continue to eke out an existence, with just enough food to ward off starvation. And then they will

do just that: they will eke out an existence. Plus, the Grameen Bank will make a profit from the interest, and look good for helping the poor, to boot. So micro-credit at its best does nothing more than make poverty slightly more tolerable for the poor; it does not eliminate their poverty or work towards a restructuring of the system, but rather serves the status quo.

Given its international attention following the Nobel Peace Prize, I had heard about the Grameen Bank before going to Bangladesh, and mainly I had heard about its micro-credit programs for the poor. However, what I did not expect to find, and what immediately struck me, upon my first drive through the city, was the fact that the Grameen Bank is advertised on literally almost every street corner. In the more wealthy areas, the Grameen Bank has done some beautification projects, including planting greenery in the middle of boulevards. Large plaques are displayed at all of these locations, loudly declaring the Grameen Bank's loyalty towards the environment. (I did not see such beautification projects in the poorer parts of Dhaka, however, which makes me wonder about these projects as little more than PR stunts for the wealthy who invest in the bank.)

On busy intersections, the Grameen Bank has posted huge billboards, usually advertising for Grameen Phone, which generates one of the largest revenues for Grameen Bank, of all its projects. They are the largest provider of SIM cards for cell phones in the country, and provide prepaid and postpaid phone cards. At almost any small storefront, in any part of town, the Grameen Phone sticker is displayed, which means that you can buy a phone card there. In other words, if one is to simply drive through Dhaka for a few minutes, it is immediately evident that

the Grameen Bank is a hugely profitable *business*. It is doing very well, financially. But I am skeptical about whether it is actually effective in alleviating poverty.

The Grameen Bank's micro-credit program has been much talked about in development circles since Yunus won the Peace Prize. Mainstream development theorists applaud his work as visionary and aiding in the liberation of poor women, as they are the primary recipients of the loans. Amartya Sen, with his typical liberal rhetoric, has this to say of Yunus:

The visionary microcredit movement, led by Muhammad Yunus, has consistently aimed at removing the disadvantage from which women suffer, because of discriminatory treatment in the rural credit market, by making a special effort to provide credit to women borrowers. The result has been a very high proportion of women among the customers of the Grameen Bank. The remarkable record of that bank in having a very high rate of repayment (reported to be close to 98 percent) is not unrelated to the way women have responded to the opportunities offered to them and to the prospects of ensuring the continuation of such arrangements. (*Development as Freedom* 201)

This statement is taken from the chapter on "Women's Agency and Social Change" in Sen's book *Development as Freedom*. Let's undertake a quick rhetorical analysis of this particular statement as a symptomatic case. It is clear that Amartya Sen characterizes a micro-credit movement as a visionary movement, a movement that envisions the freedom of women. The fundamental question is: what is credit? How does credit function? Has any visionary thought of credit as a weapon in the transformation of women's predicaments? But surely Dr. Yunus has done this, according to Sen. Sen does not examine the rhetoric of credit and its underlying implications of shackles binding the creditor and the debtor. Nor does Sen examine the profit-making processes involved in borrowing and lending, while suggesting that offering credit or loans to women holds the key to women's freedom, as if women's freedom is not a complex of an entire range of economic, social and political factors that cannot be dissociated from such

power-structures as patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism and racism, as they variously influence the everyday practices of women locally and globally—in Bangladesh and elsewhere. In other words, Sen’s own vision of the “visionary” cannot envision an entire “historic bloc”—to use Antonio Gramsci’s famous term—within which women as both victims and agents exist and operate.

Secondly, the idea of women being “customers”—given Sen’s own rhetorical deployment here—raises the question of women’s freedom from the continuous buying-selling and borrowing-lending relationship. In fact, the rhetoric of Sen reproduces women as “customers” of a bank that heavily relies on making profits. The leading Bengali intellectual Badruddin Umar has by now famously characterized this project as a “poverty trade,” a point I will discuss later. The rhetoric of morphing women into nothing but customers of a bank at least unwittingly advances a patriarchal-capitalist framework within which women’s development is envisioned by the pet project of some male visionaries like Dr. Mohammad Yunus.

Thirdly, within a typical capitalist-liberalist framework, Sen deploys the rhetoric of success and the rhetoric of quantities, mutually connected as they are, suggesting that the “success” of poor women depends on how *much* they can repay (“a very high rate of repayment”), while ignoring the question of the quality of women’s lives in a number of spheres. His measurement for the success of the Grameen Bank, being a function of the repayment rate of the loans, tells us more about the Grameen Bank’s effective debt collection system than it does about the impact on the lives of the women who take out the loans. All this is no mere economic determinism, either. The agendas underlying the deployment of such rhetorics—the rhetoric of

freedom, the rhetoric of development, the rhetoric of vision, the rhetoric of credit, the rhetoric of success, and the rhetoric of quantity, mutually reinforcing and implicating each other—are profoundly tied to the logics and axiomatics of profits in the name of women’s development and freedom, a point that Umar again makes in his by-now famous critique, *Poverty Trade of Dr. Yunus*.

Let me now take up Umar’s sustained empirical and theoretical critique of Dr. Yunus’s Grameen Bank projects. Despite some polemical registers here and there, Umar has advanced a historically engaged concrete analysis of a concrete situation involving the Grameen Bank’s long operations in an already colonially devastated and unevenly developed third-world site like Bangladesh—“the periphery of the periphery,” as the Egyptian political economist Samir Amin rightly points out in his book *The Future of Maoism*. Umar has marshaled empirical evidence, provided case studies, offered relevant historical frameworks, and used his own activist experiences in Bangladesh to advance his critique of the Grameen Bank project. His critique, by and large, demystifies and unravels the class character of the Grameen Bank project, while suggesting that this project—in the name of the development of the poor—makes poverty tolerable, if not ineradicable (a case that I myself make with regard to the operations of NGOs in Bangladesh), and that this project deepens, naturalizes, and thus fully justifies the process of exploitation at the micro-level. In other words, Umar looks at Dr. Yunus’s project as an attempt to expand capitalism in the nooks and corners of the rural areas of Bangladesh, suggesting that the micrologics and macrologics of capitalism cannot be separated from one another. On another but related trajectory, Umar reveals the monstrosity of the profits the Grameen Bank has reaped



at the expense of the rural poor in Bangladesh, while he also exposes the ideological and moral hollowness of the project that—of course—serves the neoliberalist-capitalist agenda.

Umar frames the Grameen Bank in a historical context, connecting its project to that of feudal moneylenders. As Umar puts argues in his preface to *Poverty Trade of Dr. Yunus*, “[t]he difference between traditional feudal moneylenders and Yunus does not lie in their substance, but in the method employed for realizing the loan money with interest” (7). In other words, Umar contends that the Grameen Bank serves the same role as feudal moneylenders once did, but with a “human face” (8) that conceals its exploitative agenda. This human face of the Grameen Bank, Umar argues, has been marketed to the point of propaganda by the U.S. and Europe.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that micro-credit keeps the poor relatively quiet and from developing the urge to radically change the system. To say it another way: micro-credit may have the affect of making poverty a bit more tolerable for some, but it simply cannot do away with poverty. In his foreword to Mahfuz Chowdhury’s book, *Economic Exploitation of Bangladesh*, Badruddin Umar puts it thus:

[M]ention should be made to [Chowdhury’s] evaluation of the NGO’s, particularly the Grameen Bank, a particularly pernicious NGO in the banking sector. As imperialist financial organizations, the NGO’s generally serve the interests of their donors, as it has to be, and as such they also work as handmaids of the local ruling class. [...] [B]y easily extending small loans to the rural poor at much higher interest rate than the rate of the commercial banks, [NGO’s] extract enormous surplus value from the poor rural people and try to keep them tied down to a kind of life which does not generate in them an urge for social change. In this way the NGO’s act, in the name of benevolent activities, as highly reactionary and counter-revolutionary factors. (xv)

Indeed, NGOs in Bangladesh such as the Grameen Bank rhetorically align themselves with the economic liberalism of capitalism: the poor are regarded as individual entrepreneurs, and there is

no possibility for collective social action within this framework. Loans are only given to individuals, and there is no attempt to change the overall structure of the system which requires the exploitation of the poor in order to function.

Furthermore, despite the global celebration of the apparently “feminist” micro-credit loans of the Grameen Bank, given as they are to women instead of men, as Lamia Karim has shown in her essay “Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh,” most of these loans go immediately from the women’s hands to their husbands or fathers. Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta report similar findings in “Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power, and Control Over Loan Use in Rural Credit Programs in Bangladesh.” Furthermore, Karim emphasizes the fact that micro-credit does not necessarily liberate women, but rather controls rural women through systems of honor and shame:

In analyzing the reasons why rural men allowed their women to become NGO members even though it brought their women in contact with non-kin men, one noticed a deep level of complicity between NGOs and rural men. Despite rural codes of honor/shame that dictated that women should not come in contact with non-kin men (and most NGOs, especially Grameen Bank, have male officers), rural men found it more useful to allow their women to join NGOs because they (rural men) work during the day. Poor men who lack physical collateral ‘give’ their women in membership to NGOs as economic reassurance. In reality, *the collateral that Grameen and all other NGOs extract from the poor is the Bangladeshi rural woman’s honor and shame*. The poor give their honor embodied in their women to the NGOs in exchange for the loans. It is very important to note that *this* is the pivot on which the successes of the Grameen model of micro-credit hinges. (“Demystifying Micro-Credit” 16)

The Grameen Bank’s micro-credit program organizes women into loan groups, and if one woman defaults on her loan, the whole group suffers as a result, and no one else in the group can get additional loans. Thus, for the most part, the bank does not have to do the dirty work of ensuring that loans are repayed, since the women in the loan groups are pushed into mutual policing roles that hinge on honor and shame: there is honor in repayment, and shame in

defaulting on a loan. It is not surprising, then, that the rates of loan repayment remain so high. And almost all of the laudatory studies of the Grameen Bank reference loan *repayment* as the key marker of the success of micro-credit. But this tells us little, if nothing, of how the loans have actually impacted the lives of women, for better or for worse.

Lamia Karim's essay "Demystifying Micro-Credit" and Badruddin Umar's book *Poverty Trade of Dr. Yunus* remain quite notable, simply given the fact that theirs remain some of the only studies of the Grameen Bank that combat dominant development paradigms and question the fundamental notion that bank loans are sources of liberation for the poor. On the other hand, the reams of studies that celebrate the Grameen Bank's micro-credit system could by now fill a library. Karim, in fact, talks about the rather overt functioning of the hegemony of NGO-dominated research in the context of Bangladesh, and the ways in which this hegemony silences and negates resistant voices:

Why is it that what I have written in these pages is not legible as a public discourse? The answer to that question is that the critiques are *silenced* in NGO-dominated research spaces. Knowledge is power, but power also legitimizes what counts as knowledge, and NGOs are powerful institutions in Bangladesh. The hagiographic transcripts of the Grameen Bank have to be apprehended at the crux of power/knowledge in the context of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, there is only one academic English publishing house, called University Press Limited (UPL). The editor of UPL declined to publish Aminur Rahman's critical assessment of the Grameen Bank, *Women and Micro-Credit in Bangladesh* (1999), stating that a prominent economist had advised against its publication. Interestingly, although Rahman's book was published by Westview Press in the US, his critique of the Grameen Bank lending practices was silenced in Bangladesh through the lack of alternative academic publishing institutions. (23-24)

Given such a lack of resistant voices in the public sphere of Bangladesh, I argue that the works of both Karim and Umar are of even more important as they remain some of the few that critically examine and interrogate the Grameen Bank at a time when the Nobel Prize status

granted to Yunus and the Grameen Bank—and, at least in terms of nationalist pride, to Bangladesh as well—has blinded many scholars to the fundamental contradictions of micro-credit.

### Reflections

A basic point that I hope I have conveyed throughout this chapter is that development rhetoric—while apparently advocating on behalf of the subaltern woman—ultimately obscures and even dismantles feminist projects. Furthermore, I have argued that development policies created by development organizations are an inadequate means of alleviating poverty. Developmental models only reproduce capitalism's unequal power-relations and production-relations so that third-world countries remain at the mercy of first-world "charity." And this charity is really an ameliorating cover-up for U.S. imperialist capitalism that essentially makes poverty more bearable for women in third-world countries, rather than changing the economic structure itself to build a more equitable global economy. Samir Amin, in *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, explains the problem of relying on NGOs as a means for changing the crisis of the unequal and exploitative international division of labor:

Criticisms have been formulated by what are known as NGOs of an extremely diverse nature. The concept of capitalism is unknown to many of them, and as a consequence their criticisms are strictly moral. The policies are accused of fostering poverty, as if the logic of the system had nothing to do with it. Poverty is thus seen as the product of "errors" which could be "corrected." (13)

I have noticed this kind of trend in many studies of poor women's labor, in Bangladesh and on an international scale. NGOs such as the Grameen Bank, USAID, the World Bank, the

UN and other bodies of power that do the research on women's labor tend to not see labor in terms of the global political economy of capitalism. Rather, the international division of labor becomes localized to a specific country as a "problem" the country needs to fix, or such a division of labor gets reduced to an issue of "underdevelopment" versus "development." For instance, Sara Jewitt argues in *Environment, Knowledge and Gender: Local development in India's Jharkhand* that "local people have succeeded in finding a way out of their own development 'impasse' by determining locally-based development strategies that reflect their main priorities" (41). Here, Jewitt sees the international division of labor and the first-world/third-world unequal power/production relations as "impasses" that can be overcome through finding new strategies for the development of third-world countries—in this case, India.

In a related yet different vein, the UN's 1980 "International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade" argues for countries to "adopt effective measures to enhance the involvement of women in the development process" (paragraph 163). Of course, this approach to the question of the gendered division of labor completely fails to address the fact that underdevelopment of the third world is an inherent product of capitalism and imperialism and that patriarchy in so-called "underdeveloped" countries is necessarily upheld and intensified by first-world capitalist-imperialist macrologics and operations. Furthermore, the UN's focus on the woman question through the Declaration of International Women's Day does little to help advance the cause of women in a country like Bangladesh. This is a point that Farida Akhter has made, in fact. In a recent e-mail exchange, Akhter made the following observation:

Many people forgot about the Norplant issue, but it is very symbolic for me of how American Imperialism is inserted under our skin and then is controlling our lives. This year, when we are celebrating the 100 years of the Declaration of International Women's

Day [IWD], I find that after the UN (basically, the US) declared and recognised IWD to be officially celebrated on March 8, the women's movement is de-politicised. I am currently working on reviewing 100 years of women's movement and am very disappointed at the mainstream movement being hijacked by the donors' agenda and mandates of the so-called women's development (WID, WAD, GAD).<sup>10</sup>

Akhter thus draws rather critical connections between US imperialism, the USAID Norplant trials conducted in Bangladesh, the UN Declaration of International Women's Day, and the role played by western donor agencies in Bangladesh, all of which have simultaneously claimed to take up the cause of women, while stripping women of their own agency.

Instead of relying, then, on the models for change that are (over)produced by capitalist institutions such as USAID, the World Bank, the Grameen Bank, the UN, and donor agencies—limited as such models are by their developmentalist approaches—I propose an approach that brings together anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal frameworks. Such an approach might provide an economic base for understanding how the racist-patriarchal international division of labor and the exploitation of poor women's labor-power and reproductive labor is rooted—at least in part—in the very foundations of the capitalist system itself.

In order to move forward, then, in terms of thinking of alternatives to developmentalist models that remain embedded within capitalism, it is crucial that we attend to the critiques of development that are currently being raised in a number of locations across the third world. To return to Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development*, he asserts that

Critiques of development produced in the Third World are beginning to circulate in the West. This aspect deserves some attention, because it raises other complex questions, beginning with "what is the West." As Ashis Nandy writes, the "West is now

everywhere, within the West and outside: in structures and minds” (1983, xii). There is sometimes a reluctance on the part of some of the Third World authors who call for the dismantling of development to acknowledge this fact—that is, to keep on seeing strong traditions and radical resistance in places where perhaps there are other things going on as well. But there is also a reluctance on the part of academic audiences in the First World—particularly the progressive audiences who want to recognize the agency of Third World people—to think about how they appropriate and “consume” Third World voices for their own needs, whether it is to provide the expected difference, renew hope, or think through political directions. (224)

To restate his points, Escobar identifies two problems here. The first problem is that of class privilege within the third world—the privileged writer imposing a sense of prevalent resistance to the hegemony of development where it may not exist, or at least not to such an extent. The second problem is that of first-world progressives appropriating voices emanating from the third world in order to serve their own purposes. Escobar sees a direct link between the two problems, arguing that “[i]f Third World intellectuals who travel to the West must position themselves in a more self-conscious manner vis-à-vis both their Third World constituencies and their First World audiences—that is, with respect to the political functions they take on—European and American audiences must be more self-critical of their practices of reading Third World voices” (224). A fundamental notion that Escobar is trying to get across here is the fact that “theory is no longer simply produced in one place and applied in another; in the post-Fordist world, theorists and theories travel across discontinuous terrains” (224).

Theory does indeed travel, although the power-knowledge nexus is constantly at play in terms of which theories get the most attention and have the largest impact. But given our own locations of privilege within the first world, I argue that American academics invested in progressive politics and activist scholarship *must* engage more rigorously in the dialectical processes of self-critique and dialogue across national borders—in other words, the “critical

internationalization” I spoke of in the first chapter—knowing that such exchanges never escape unequal power-relations even as we aspire to democracy in its purest form.

My argument in this chapter may be simplified as follows: the overdevelopment of the first world—the minority of the world’s population—is dependent on the underdevelopment of the third world (and the third world within the first), the majority of the world’s population. In fact, I am drawn to Chandra Mohanty’s creative renaming of the third world as the “two-thirds world” or the “social majority” (*Feminism Without Borders* 228) because these terms emphasize the fact that most of the people on this planet do not benefit from globalized capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Rhetorical critiques such as the ones I have tried to advance here might aid in the process of dismantling the hegemony of the development discourse that continues to circulate through institutions such as the World Bank, USAID, and the Grameen Bank. To rehearse what is hopefully the obvious: it is the few who control the many. Development paradigms continue to paint the third world as if it is in the constant process of transforming itself into the first world through development. And the assumption is that if it (the third world) doesn’t get there (to first world status), then it must not have tried hard enough.

Let me say this in a different way, by drawing on Victor Villanueva’s notion of the “bootstraps mentality.” In the context of the U.S., the bootstraps mentality is the racist conception “that people of color don’t do better because they don’t try harder, that most are content to feed off the State” (“On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism” 651). In a global context, then, the racist-imperialist assumption is that the third world is simply not trying hard enough; it needs to yank harder on its own collective, giant, bootstrap so that it doesn’t have to



keep relying on the benevolence of first-world “aid.” Maria Mies calls it “The Myth of Catching-up Development.” As Mies puts it:

Virtually all development strategies are based on the explicit or implicit assumption that the model of ‘the good life’ is that prevailing in the affluent societies of the North: the USA, Europe and Japan. The question of how the poor in the North, those in the countries of the South, and peasants and women worldwide may attain this ‘good life’ is usually answered in terms of what, since Rostow, can be called the ‘catching-up development’ path. This means that by following the same path of industrialization, technological progress and capital accumulation taken by Europe and the USA and Japan the same goal can be reached. The affluent countries and classes, the dominant sex—the men—the dominant urban centres and lifestyles are then perceived as the realized utopia of liberalism, a utopia still to be attained by those who apparently still lag behind. [...] [T]his catching-up development path is a myth: nowhere has it led to the desired goal. (150)

Case in point: the other day, I came across a statement—by an American, of course—that appeared in the comment section of a news article on the case of the eighth-grade science teacher named Melissa Hussain that I discussed in the first chapter. The commenter complained (and I have not changed the spelling or punctuation): “this country was founded on Christian beliefs by western europeans who intended it to stay that way and not become the worlds mother.”<sup>12</sup> There is much unpacking to do here. How is the U.S. able to position itself rhetorically as the “mother” of the very countries it also happens to colonize, overtly (in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, currently) and less overtly (in the case of Bangladesh). And, of course, white supremacist racism, Eurocentrism, and xenophobia are also embedded in such a statement (but that is another study altogether). So the underlying assumption of development is that the infantilized third world can eventually grow up and become just like its “mother,” the first world. Of course, this can never happen logistically, given the planet’s limited resources. If the entire globe were to exploit the

world's resources and labor-power at the rate of the U.S. and Europe, we would very quickly run out of planet and people to exploit.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### UNSEVERED TONGUES: WOMEN'S LITERARY, CULTURAL AND ACTIVIST PRODUCTIONS IN BANGLADESH

In Bengal in the Middle ages  
Lived a woman Khanaa, I sing her life  
The first Bengali woman poet  
Her tongue they severed with a knife  
Her speechless voice, “Khanaar Bachan”  
Still resonates in the hills and skies  
Only the poet by the name of Khanaa  
Bleeding she dies.

—Mallika Sengupta, “Khanaa”<sup>1</sup>

With as much pain as a human endures to become a woman,  
That much pain makes a woman a poet;  
A word takes a long-suffering year to be made,  
And a poem takes a whole life.

When a woman becomes a poet, she is totally a woman;  
She is mature enough then to give birth to words from the womb of suffering  
And to cover words with patchwork wrappers.

You have to be a woman first if you want to give birth to a poem.  
Words which are born without any pain are fragile—they break when touched.  
And who knows more than a woman all the ins and outs of pain!

—Taslima Nasreen, “Women and Poems”<sup>2</sup>

#### **Bengali Women's Literary and Cultural Productions: Moving Beyond Taslima**

In the preceding chapter, I offered a feminist critique of what might be called a “top-down” development rhetoric in Bangladesh, particularly that of the Grameen Bank and USAID. Such top-down rhetoric produces representations of women in Bangladesh—of course, primarily

poor women—while the women who are represented have little to no say in how they are being represented. Now, in this chapter, I discuss a couple but representative women’s literary and cultural productions emanating from Bangladesh, productions in which women not only represent themselves but also often remain resistant to the ways in which women become fixed and frozen within western development discourse as the voiceless subaltern, stripped of agency. I also discuss the ways in which some Bangladeshi women writers have been received in the West.

To begin with, I examine the Western reception of the works of the internationally-known Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen (who is referred to as “Taslima” in Bangladesh, while also—given Bengali conventions—the writer’s first name instead of last name is usually used). First of all, I use the term “Western reception” with caution, knowing that there can be no neat and easy split as such between the “West” and the “East” in this era of globalization. Arjun Appadurai even goes so far as to argue that “[t]he new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” (*Modernity at Large* 33). The center-periphery lines get quickly blurred, for instance, when we talk about reception of Taslima’s work by the Bengalis located in the diaspora. This is, however, not to suggest that under certain other material circumstances, the center-periphery dyad cannot be strategically used. In fact, I still think it is useful to refer to such a politically constructed category as the “West” in terms of locating the dominant structures of power/knowledge production.

I am interested in interrogating, then, certain politically suggestive cultural fields surrounding Taslima's work, not only the cultural field in which her work is produced, but also those fields in which her work is read, received, interpreted, examined, acclaimed, denigrated, or even tokenized. Except for one brief visit to Bangladesh in 1998 when her mother was dying of cancer, Taslima Nasreen has been exiled from Bangladesh since 1994, given the *fatwa* (a supposedly theologically-supported verdict involving a death threat) that was placed on her head by Muslim fundamentalists of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Although she has written against Islamic fundamentalism on numerous occasions, the *fatwa* in question arose not as a response to her writings on Islam, but to her novella *Lajja* (Shame), which she wrote in protest to various forms of communalism and fundamentalism in South Asia, particularly those that arose in the violent aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Mosque in India in December, 1992 a bloody event in which thousands of Indian Muslims were killed. This led to a chain of violent events in Bangladesh as well, in which Hindu families were harassed, persecuted, and even killed, and their property was destroyed. *Lajja* fictionally documents the violence against the Hindus in Bangladesh through the story of one Hindu family, whose roots are in Bangladesh but who are forced to move to India.<sup>4</sup>

Although the *fatwa* has been outlawed and the group that had issued the *fatwa*—which called itself the “Council of Soldiers of Islam”<sup>5</sup>—has been forced to recant, Taslima has not found her own country a safe place because of the ways in which the interconnections between the bourgeois right-wing government, Muslim fundamentalists, and the general patriarchal political culture have worked against Taslima's acceptance in the country. Here I examine the

ways in which Taslima's case has become international in human rights and feminist circles, while I also examine the rhetorical framing of her case on an international stage. The reason that I focus particularly on the reception of her work is that I am interested in examining the ways in which she has come to represent *the* voice of women in Bangladesh for many Western feminists and human rights activists, at the expense of many other voices.

### **Taslima Nasreen and Western Eyes: Reflections on Western Receptions and Disjunctures**

Let us, then, examine how Taslima has been received in the West—mostly as a brown woman oppressed by Muslim men in her “barbaric” country. As I examine this reception, I don't intend to downplay the stark realities of patriarchy and feminist struggles in Bangladesh. Of course there are specific workings of patriarchy, male chauvinism, and numerous forms of violence against women, including the fundamentalist forms of patriarchy in Bangladesh. But I intend to suggest, as well, that wholesale, sweeping characterizations of Bangladeshi society as the fundamentalist, patriarchal “Other” not only miss the point, but also prompt, facilitate, and even legitimize Orientalist, racist and imperialist interventions from outside.

Before I examine a few symptomatic ways that Taslima's case has been received, I think I should make a few points about U.S. imperialism and fundamentalism, connected as they are, so as to clear the space for our understanding of Taslima Nasreen's reception. Indeed, imperialist interventions themselves provide a context in which we can look at how Taslima Nasreen has been received in the West, and why. To speak of such interventions, then, is to speak of the very

role of the U.S. government in Bangladesh, to begin with. Indeed, the U.S. has been operating in Bangladesh since its birth in 1971 and even before. And especially after 9/11, Bangladesh has been put on the “black list” of terrorist countries by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. At that time, for instance, all Bangladeshi men residing in the U.S. on non-immigrant visas were required to go through a process of special registration (read racial profiling).<sup>6</sup> In fact, U.S. imperialism has targeted Bangladesh—as it has targeted other Muslim countries—by cashing in on the current war on terror and anti-Islam hysteria prevalent in the United States since 9/11.

But the questions that I want to pose here are: Is U.S. imperialism so starkly opposed to fundamentalism in Bangladesh? Also, is Bangladesh a fundamentalist country, as it is most often portrayed in the mainstream media and government-sponsored or government-funded scholarly works, including C.I.A.-assisting Area Studies? It is true that there is a history of the growth and even a certain expansion of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. But it is also true that the mainstream media and Area Studies, including the U.S. government, tend to overstate the case, as a number of Bengali intellectuals such as Farhad Mazhar have argued.

However, studies such as Hiranmay Karlekar’s *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* (2005) tend to reinforce the Western perception of Bangladesh as the breeding-ground for terrorism. Karlekar argues that Bangladesh is in danger of becoming not only a country like Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, but also “a global exporter of terrorism” (15). What Karlekar misses, however, is the fact that the U.S. itself—the largest exporter of guns and arms, including weapons of mass destruction—remains the fundamental global exporter of terrorism. Eqbal Ahmed, in his book *Terrorism: Theirs and Ours*, makes this point very convincingly, while

William Blum historically demonstrates the terrorism of U.S. military interventions in his book called *Killing Hope: A Concise History of Military Interventions* with numerous concrete examples.

Of course, the practice of eliding the terrorism of imperialism by focusing on the terrorism of Islamic fundamentalism continues to be a dominant practice today. Relating to this practice, yet another problematic Western representation of Bangladesh can be found in a relatively recent *New York Times* article, “The Next Islamic Revolution?” (2005) by Eliza Griswold. She reflects on the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh, and discusses the violence perpetrated by the infamous “Bangla Bhai” and his followers in rural Bangladesh. It should be noted that Bangla Bhai has, by now, been executed, although the history of fundamentalism in Bangladesh does not have to do only with a few individuals like him perpetrating violence, but has to do with the ways in which mainstream bourgeois politics has played out, forging politically significant connections among mainstream political parties and fundamentalist groups in the country, while all of them were directly or indirectly supported by U.S. imperialism from time to time.

At least two theorists have exemplarily theorized and charted out the connections between U.S. imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism by and large: Samir Amin and Tariq Ali.<sup>7</sup> Both of them have argued that U.S. imperialism has lent ideological and even financial support to a number of fundamentalist groups across the Muslim world, from Egypt to Pakistan and Bangladesh.



But it is also true that after September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has deliberately sought Islamic fundamentalism as its “enemy” to the extent that it becomes an excuse for imperialist interventions, while cashing in on the input of secular but liberal intellectuals, writers, and activists who also oppose fundamentalism in some ways, without looking at its historical connections to imperialism itself. In other words, it is imperialism that both opposes and supports fundamentalism, depending on what its specific agendas in specific sites are. In the case of Bangladesh, U.S. imperialism these days opposes Islamic fundamentalism as a terrorist force, and it is this force of which Taslima Nasreen herself remains critical, without adequately examining its complex and overdetermined connections to U.S. imperialism itself.

Now, against this complex background of tensions and transactions between imperialism and fundamentalism, let us look at how Taslima Nasreen’s work has been received in the West. However, my purpose in this section is not to provide a systematic textual reading of Taslima Nasreen’s works, but to examine the dynamics of her reception in the West to see how Western feminists overemphasize Taslima as a person and the case of the fatwa against her at the expense of engaging her actual writings. To begin with, Hafina Deen has ably and instructively documented the emergence and subsequent fame of Taslima Nasreen’s case in the international sphere in her book *The Crescent and the Pen: The Strange Journey of Taslima Nasreen*. Deen documents various receptions of Taslima’s works, and also examines the comparisons that have often been drawn between Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie. For instance, Deen writes:

Two deliberate tactics were employed by the Indian and Western media in 1994 to promote Taslima. One compared Taslima with Salman Rushdie, and the other compared Bangladesh to Iran. There were dozens of women writers the freedom of expression activists could have chosen, to raise on high, but they chose Nasreen, partly because they

could distil her experience into a Rushdie-like analogy and because she told them what they wanted to hear, by feeding a latent anti-Islamic prejudice. In a strange way Taslima Nasreen has been punished by two conflicting myths: the first turned her into a saint, the other demonized her—the Madonna and the whore all over again. (264)

In some ways, then, Taslima Nasreen has played into the misappropriation of her own work, given her overemphasis on Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh at the expense of focusing on other systems of domination and oppression, capitalism and U.S. imperialism included. Although in some of her very recent works, Taslima takes up some issues relating to U.S. imperialism, for the most part she does not explicitly draw connections between imperialism and fundamentalism or, for that matter, the connections between the mainstream bourgeois political culture and fundamentalism.

Let us further examine the international reception of Taslima's work. In her essay "An Affair to Remember: Scripted Performances in the 'Nasreen Affair,'" the Bengali feminist Bishnupriya Ghosh has provided a relatively detailed analysis of the kinds of international reception that Taslima Nasreen has been accorded. Ghosh analyzes the reception of what she calls "the Nasreen affair" according to geopolitical locations: "Bangladesh, India (as one aspect of the 'subcontinent'), and the West (Europe and the United States)" (41), while she also takes up a set of responses grouped under the ideological position of feminist readings. Regarding Western feminist receptions of Taslima, Ghosh writes:

The Western feminist response [...] is determined by both the feminists' imperial reading of the Third World and of fundamentalism as a particular threat to women's rights at this historical juncture. This kind of response is precisely what was anticipated by the Bangladeshi feminists in their withdrawal of support from Nasreen. (73)

What Ghosh is pointing out here, in other words, is how Bangladeshi feminists themselves anticipated the possible western appropriation, exoticization, or even romanticization of Taslima. As a matter of fact, a number of Bengali feminists withheld their support to Taslima because of her own lack of connection with and even indifference to a number of feminist organizations and movements in the country. According to such feminists, Taslima Nasreen was more interested in her own cause and fame than she was in the cause of actually-existing women's movements that took up the life-and-death questions of poor peasant women and working-class women, for instance—movements with which she could have aligned, or even movements about which she could have written. For instance, in her essay “Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh,” the feminist writer and scholar Firdous Azim writes:

[Taslima Nasreen] has been celebrated in the west as a brave lone voice who has protested against Islamic strictures on women, and who has had to pay the price of exile as a result. Within Bangladesh, extreme religious groups have not surprisingly castigated Taslima Nasreen as a woman who has gone against her own religion and people. But what has been surprising is that other writers or women's groups have not championed her cause either. It seems that she was seen to be somehow complicit with the prevalent Islam-bashing. (195)

The reverse can also be said: Taslima has not championed the cause of Bengali women's groups. Occasionally Taslima talks about poor working-class women, but she does not talk about their movements. Also, I take cues from the Bangladeshi feminist academic and activist Dina Siddiqi, who critiques Taslima Nasreen thus:

Nasreen was not the first intellectual to speak out against discrimination towards minorities or to criticize Islam openly. It is the timing and the nature of her political interventions that allowed her to be so easily manipulated. Nasreen's facile use of Orientalist imagery, without any reference to her own political location, made her texts perfect fodder for propaganda for both Hindu and

Muslim religious extremists and for the Bangladeshi state. Her popularity in India coincided with a general rise in hostility towards Muslims there. (“Taslima Nasreen and Others” 220)

As I say this, I’m not, by any means, dismissing Taslima’s roles and contributions as a feminist writer, while I am against the fatwas and patriarchal criticisms and censoring that she has been brutally subject to in Bangladesh and outside it. It is also to be acknowledged that she has been under all sorts of attacks, and as a woman she has not only suffered in her own home country, but also in the West. She is currently an exile in Europe, while she hasn’t stopped writing against patriarchy and fundamentalism in particular. It should also be mentioned that a number of male critics have been screamingly critical of her style, arguing that she is not a fine “literary” author, and that she is a vulgar or third-rate poet and novelist, and so on, while these male authors themselves have never adequately engaged the actual substance of her work that brings up the question of women’s oppression. Mark the poem “You Go Girl!” for instance, which I quoted earlier in another context, and which I would like to re-quote here:<sup>8</sup>

They said—take it easy...  
Said—calm down...  
Said—stop talkin’...  
Said—shut up....  
They said—sit down....  
Said—bow your head...  
Said—keep on cryin’, let the tears roll...

What should you do in response?

You should stand up now  
Should stand right up  
Hold your back straight  
Hold your head high...

You should speak  
Speak your mind  
Speak it loudly  
Scream!

You should scream so loud that they must run for cover.  
They will say—“You are shameless!”  
When you hear that, just laugh...

They will say—“You have a loose character!”  
When you hear that, just laugh louder...

They will say—“You are rotten!”  
So just laugh, laugh even louder...

Hearing you laugh, they will shout,  
“You are a whore!”

When they say that,  
just put your hands on your hips,  
stand firm and say,  
“Yes, yes, I am a whore!”

They will be shocked.  
They will stare in disbelief.  
They will wait for you to say more, much more...

The men amongst them will turn red and sweat.  
The women amongst them will dream to be a whore like you

Let me give another example of a very interesting critical observation Taslima makes, regarding the patriarchy embedded in contemporary Bengali discourse. In her *Selected Columns*, for instance, she writes:

*Samartha Sabdakosh* [a Bengali dictionary] is a wonderful addition to the Bengali language and literature. In this valuable edition there are a number of synonyms for a ‘man’—‘purushmanush’, ‘betachele’, ‘chele’, ‘marad’, ‘manab’, ‘manush’, ‘manushya’

and others. For a woman, the synonyms are—‘stri’, ‘manabi’ and others. The numerous synonyms for ‘woman’ however do not mention ‘manush’ which simply means ‘human’. Learned men have found this thesaurus a remarkable achievement but I have been shocked to see the two distinct meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. (5)

Indeed, not a single male critic either from the East or the West has hitherto critically engaged this particular poem or text either substantively or stylistically. This very lack of engagement indicates that Taslima herself, as a writer, remains relevant insofar as patriarchy and imperialism continue to oppress women in a variety of ways, and in different contexts. Taslima Nasreen thus provides a case in which we see how the imperial West, on the one hand, exoticizes and appropriates her, and on the other, how patriarchy itself bypasses the actual radical content of Taslima’s own written work, while Taslima herself remains relatively inattentive to how imperialism has supported both patriarchy and fundamentalism against women, and even herself as an individual. Of course, in some works she has drawn this connection at least briefly. In an interview entitled “They Wanted to Kill Me”—an interview regarding the fatwa against her in Bangladesh—Taslima Nasreen observes, for instance, “For their own political purposes, not only the Middle Eastern leaders but also the Western ones have made compromises with the fundamentalists — to get votes or to fight communism. Both have given the fundamentalists a sort of legitimacy” (73). But Taslima has not sustained this argument in the rigorous way that she has sustained her critique of Bengali patriarchy.

Taslima does, however, make certain connections among patriarchies on a global scale that oppress women, “covered or naked.” In her poem “Women,” for instance, she writes:

Women are oppressed in the east, in the west, in the south, in the north.  
Women are oppressed inside, outside home.

Women are oppressed if their hair is dark or brown or blonde  
If their eyes are brown or blue.

A woman is oppressed in religion, she is oppressed outside religion  
Whether she is a believer or a non-believer, she is oppressed.  
Beautiful or ugly, oppressed.  
Honest or dishonest, oppressed.

Whether she is crippled or not.  
Dumb, or blind.  
Healthy or sick—she is oppressed.  
Rich or poor, oppressed.  
Whether she is educated or illiterate, oppressed.  
Whether she is a child, a girl or a young or an old woman, oppressed.  
Covered or naked, she is oppressed.  
Whether she is shrewish or dumb, oppressed.  
Cowardly or courageous, she is always oppressed. (*All About Women* 60-61)

Again, we do not find much critical attention to a poem like this one in the West, given the fact that it does not fit as neatly into Orientalist and condescending feminist frameworks as some of her other works do, the ones that focus exclusively on Bangladesh. Furthermore, I argue that the kinds of well-meaning, but ultimately Orientalist, romanticized and “Western-eyes” receptions of her writing are problematic in that they serve to isolate her writing from the rich and varied field of feminist literary and cultural traditions in Bangladesh, as if hers is the only feminist voice of dissent emanating from the country. And often the “reception” is limited to an analysis of her fatwa case at the level of human rights, while her writing is almost completely ignored.

In fact, when it comes to the Western reception of writings of women of color in third-world countries, Gayatri Spivak has some very good points to make vis-à-vis modes of reading that she characterizes as “information retrieval” (*In Other Worlds* 179).<sup>9</sup> Spivak puts it thus:

[W]hen we wander out of our own academic and First-World enclosure, we share something like a relationship with Senanayak’s doublethink. When we speak for

ourselves, we urge with conviction: the personal is also political. For the rest of the world's women, the sense of whose personal micrology is difficult (though not impossible) for us to acquire, we fall back on a colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval. We will not be able to speak to the women out there if we depend completely on conferences and anthologies by Western-trained informants. (*In Other Worlds* 179)

Rey Chow also takes up this issue, pointing out that such an information-retrieval approach to third world literary productions “condemn[s] ‘third world’ cultural production . . . to a kind of realism with functions of authenticity, didacticism, and deep meaning” (*Primitive Passions* 56).

Such conceptions greatly diminish our understanding—or even basic knowledge—in the West of the broad field of feminist cultural production in Bangladesh. I am reminded here, for instance, of a response I often get in the U.S. when I mention feminist activist organizations in Bangladesh: “they have those in Bangladesh?” This response is tied to a certain brand of “racist feminism”<sup>10</sup>—to deploy Audre Lorde’s term (*Sister Outsider* 112)—or even what I wish to call “Orientalist feminism,” one that assumes feminist voices do not exist within the space of the Other and, especially in the context of the post 9/11 world, the Islamic Other.

In other words, the nearly exclusive attention to Taslima Nasreen has added to this Orientalist feminist perception, I would argue. The fact that she has in fact been exiled from Bangladesh prompts some western human rights activists and feminists to make rather sweeping generalizations, that if a Bengali feminist is to operate as a writer and an activist, she can only do so outside of the confines of the Muslim-majority country. Of course, there is no doubt that patriarchy remains an overriding structure of oppression and exploitation in Bangladesh, and I do not mean to diminish the fact that patriarchy remains a very real and critical question for many women, especially for poor women. But while numerous feminist writers, scholars, poets,



novelists, playwrights, musicians, and activist feminist organizations exist and operate in Bangladesh, they have received very little attention internationally.

### **Bengali Feminist Fore-Mothers**

Before I take up at least a few examples of contemporary feminists working and operating in Bangladesh, I would like to mention a few feminist “fore-mothers”—writers and activists of Colonial Bengal. Here, I need to point out that some western feminists even fix and freeze Bengali cultural and literary productions—in colonial Bengal and today—as if they are only patriarchal. Zillah Eisenstein, for instance, in her otherwise outstanding book *Against Empire: Feminisms, Racism, and the West*, makes a rather surprising sweeping claim regarding Bengali theorists, one that is rather inaccurate. In chapter five, “Colonialism and Difference: The ‘Othering’ of Alternative Democracies,” Eisenstein generalizes about “Bengali theorists” based on a handful of male writers from Bangladesh and West Bengal, including Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Based on these extremely limited readings of writers—and only a handful of writers from the past several decades—Eisenstein asserts:

Bengali theorists imagine a democracy that does not fully celebrate the uniqueness of individual women. This engendering of the nation occludes the very individuality and diversity that they claim is necessary for a total inclusive oneness. The vision of the nation as “mother of us all,” is not one of diversity in unity. The unity of “mother of the nation” smashes women’s variety and re-colonizes women for nation building once again. The diversity and realness of the nation is defined by and for men, as brothers coming to self-actualization. Woman, as mother, becomes an abstraction of the whole without becoming an active force in the unity. (110)

While she is right to critique the patriarchy embedded in nationalist discourse, Eisenstein paints a picture of “Bengali theorists” as if they are all men, and women are absent from the scene. This could not be further from the truth. Certainly patriarchal theorists abound in Bangladesh, but so do feminist theorists, and feminist theorists who articulate a different vision of the state that does not reduce women to the “mother of the nation.” In other words, Eisenstein shows here a glaring lack of knowledge about Bengali theorists, past and present when she makes the generalized statement the Bengali theorists as a whole “remain dominated by masculinist imperial views that continue to create silences and oppression of women” (111) and that “they have yet fully to decolonize women, and therefore themselves” (111).

The assumption here is that the Bengali writers and theorists are exclusively men, and exclusively patriarchal. But this is not the case. Even in colonial Bengal, for instance, there were in fact quite a number of feminist voices within the public sphere in Tagore’s time, such as (most famously) Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain<sup>11</sup>—who wrote at great lengths in direct opposition to the kinds of patriarchal nation-building of the Bengali theorists that Eisenstein critiques—and also Khaerunnessa Khatun, Masuda Rahman, Ayesha Ahmed, Faziltunnessa, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua, Samsunnahar Mahmud, and Sufia Kamal, among others.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, as a feminist, of course I find it necessary to interrogate patriarchal writers, yet I find it dangerous to make vast generalizations about all Bengali male writers as being fundamentally opposed to women’s liberation. For instance, we should pay attention to the fact that some current feminist activists in Bangladesh have recuperated stories about women written by male authors from colonial Bengal to advance the cause of women. Shireen Huq, for instance, writes about how the women’s organization Naripokkho presented a re-reading of Rabindranath

Tagore's dance-drama *Chitrangada* on International Women's Day (March 8, 1990).

Naripokkho came under some criticism for choosing Tagore's story to mark International Women's Day, given the fact that it is the love story of a princess and hence not necessarily the typical story of the "emancipated" woman. But in her essay "Rights and the Women's Movement," Huq writes:

In *Chitrangada* we found a woman struggling to transcend gender-defined roles. Brought up as a warrior, the princess Chitrangada is celebrated for her "manly" abilities, and prides herself for them, as she goes hunting and riding in the forest. It is only when she beholds Arjun and falls hopelessly in love with him that she realizes she is a woman. Rabindranath's text inverts established sex roles, only to highlight a woman's desire and longing. [...] The fight for women's rights is not just one for more opportunities, more resources—not only for bread, as it were. It steps into the arena of desire and sexuality, and asserts its right to love and for a fuller and freer expression of desire. The struggle is for both bread and roses. (19-20)

Huq argued in this case, in other words, that the fight for women's rights should not be for opportunities only, but also for the "right to love and for a more open dialogue regarding desire and sexuality. It was Tagore's own drama that served useful in this context. In other words, there were serious feminist re-readings of progressive male authors who have been routinely bypassed by Western feminists who tend to posit Bangladesh as a country that lacks the history of feminist resistance and even male-female solidarities in the interest of feminism itself.

### **Feminism in the Context of Bangladesh**

Women's movements in countries such as Bangladesh can be seen to operate within a cleft stick—under the shadow of a growing Islamization, on the one hand, and under Western eyes on the other.

—Firdous Azim, "Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh" (195)

Yet another point to be made here is that Eisenstein’s notion of feminism—and, by extension, various Western approaches to feminist theory and practice—may not necessarily align themselves neatly with Bengali feminists’ notions of feminism. Consider, for instance, Farida Akhter’s observations regarding the concept of “feminism” in Bangladesh:

The word and the notion of ‘feminism’ are, for historical reasons, alien to the women of Bangladesh. The struggle for the emancipation of women in our society has its own historical struggle and cultural and philosophical premises. We intend to use the word “feminism” in a broader global sense without forgetting our own history. The interest of women of the South may or may not always be the same with that of their sisters in the North. While there are unities in feminist voices, there are disunities as well. A truly global vision of women’s emancipation does not exist yet; it is a task to be achieved. (“Introductory Words” 7)

Akhter makes these observations in her introduction to Maria Mies’ book, *Search for a New Vision*, Farida Akhter, who has been involved in establishing the first feminist press and bookstore in Bangladesh, Narigrantha Prabartana. In English, it is referred to as “The Feminist Bookstore.” But Akhter explains that the Bengali version of the name—which is literally “Introducing Women’s Books”—does not directly translate as “feminist,” given the fact that the term feminism is not necessarily a meaningful or empowering term for women in Bangladesh. Regarding the issue of translating the name of the bookstore, Akhter writes: “In Bengali the translation of ‘feminist bookstore’ is too high-sounding for the common women, whom we intend to reach through our activities” (7).

Akhter further talks about the concept of “feminism” in Bangladesh, in her introduction to Mies’ book, while she also explains the difficulties that exist in translating terms such as “gender.” Let me then quote Akhter:

The Bengali word for “feminism” is “naribadi”—which failed to reach women beyond the urban middle class and eventually served the class aspirations of elite city women. Since the late 1980s we got as a ‘gift’ from the international agencies, a new rhetoric, “gender.” Now women have become “gender.” The implication of this displacement of feminism, of anti-patriarchal struggle of women around the world—to mere ‘gender’ development, is profound. Women’s dreams of re-visioning the future by revising and transforming patriarchal discourses and undertaking activities to mobilize both women and men to dismantle the patriarchal world for all, has been replaced with “gender sensitization.” (8)

Akhter’s discussion of the interpretation of the terms “feminist” and “gender” in the context of Bangladesh remains critical to our discussion, given the unequal power-relations inherent in the project of translation itself. Furthermore, her argument for how such terms necessarily undergo changes and transformations in its translation across regional and international lines is critical to our understanding of the possibilities—and limitations—of international feminist solidarity and of Western feminist interactions with Bengali versions of third-world feminism.

Furthermore, for many women’s organizations in Bangladesh, the woman question is inherently tied to the class question in such a way that such organizations cannot imagine the emancipation of women without the emancipation of the working class and the peasantry. This is a formulation and a position which have been taken up by the country’s leading Marxist-feminist organization, *Biplobi Nari Songhoti* [Revolutionary Women’s Solidarity]—an organization that directly works with urban workers, particularly including women garment workers and the rural peasantry. *Biplobi Nari Songhoti* theoretically emphasizes the need for a Marxist feminism that remains alive and attentive to the deep specificities of women’s problems, struggles and aspirations in a third-world country like Bangladesh, while the organization stretches the terrain and tools of Marxian political economy to account for the unpaid labor of women that is routinely rendered invisible in the male-dominated labor accounting, from their household or

from the rural field to the urban work areas, suggesting thereby the overdetermined and multilayered nature of the exploitation of women's labor under patriarchal capitalism. Indeed, *Biplobi Nari Songhoti* directly speaks of and deploys terms such as “patriarchal capitalism” and “patriarchal imperialism” to also critique the Western liberal mode of deploying euphemisms like “free-market economy” or even “women's work,” if not women's exploited and alienated labor-power.<sup>13</sup>

Also, the women's organization *Naripokkho*—while not strictly aligning itself with the Marxist tradition—has taken up the women's question without bypassing the class question as such. Shireen Huq, who is one of the key organizers and activists of this organization, has articulated in some ways the collective position of the organization in her instructively-titled essay, “Bodies as Sites of Struggle: Naripokkho and the Movement for Women's Rights in Bangladesh.”<sup>14</sup> Huq narrates the history of the emergence of *Naripokkho* thus:

A number of us, all women who were engaged in one way or another with the situation of rural women in Bangladesh, had come together in 1980 to try to forge a collective identity from wherein we could intervene on the woman question. We wished to pursue, both professionally and politically, our vision of social change and women's emancipation. The choices we had made in our personal lives reflected our desire and our determination to be free and different from what was destined for women in Bangladesh. Naripokkho was founded as a result of that collective desire. (48)

The membership of *Naripokkho* includes working-class women as well as middle-class and upper-class women, who share a commitment to women's liberation in its various manifestations, yet who tend to resist essentializing women, and who also resist the western label “feminist.”

## Introducing Selina Hossain

A novelist friend told me the other day, ‘Your column is very good.’ After I thanked him he said something for which I was completely unprepared. He said, ‘Your prose is better than Selina Hossain’s.’

‘Selina Hossain?’ I asked. He said, ‘Selina Hossain is the best among women writers, that’s why.’

‘Among women writers’ was a gift given to me that day. However good my prose may be, I will only be judged ‘among the women’—because they form a separate category. In the national dailies there is a ‘children’s section’ and a page marked ‘women’. Famous critics thoughtfully analyse whether my verse is better than Nasima’s or Suhita’s or Bilora’s, but they never compare it with David’s or Shahria’s. That’s because I am a woman, I must be compared only with other women.

—Taslima Nasreen, *Selected Columns* (13-14)

Let me now move on to another significant but related site—a site of feminist literary activism. While in the above quote Taslima Nasreen is right to question the male novelist friend’s assumption that women’s writing is only to be compared with other women, the comparison is, nonetheless, a useful one, given certain critical alliances between the feminist writing of Taslima Nasreen and of Selina Hossain.<sup>15</sup> However, I do not suggest that their writings perfectly align—and, in fact, I would argue that Selina’s writing sustains an attention to the workings of political economy in a way that Taslima’s writings do not. And Selina Hossain remains the most prolific woman novelist of Bangladesh and certainly one of the most important women writers of Bangladesh, holding a status similar to that of Mahasweta Devi in West Bengal.<sup>16</sup> She has written over twenty novels, seven short story collections, four prose writing collections, and four collections of children’s stories. A few of her novels have been translated into French, Russian and English, and some of the regional languages of India. A total of thirty-four of her books have been included in the Library of Congress collection. She has won a

number of awards such as the Bangla Academy Award (1980), the Alaol Purashkar (1981), the Ford Foundation Fellowship (1994-95) for her novel *Gayatri Sandhya*, and she has worked as the Director of the Bangla Academy in Bangladesh. In her work, Selina variously addresses social and political issues of Bangladesh, particularly as they relate to the daily lives and struggles of poor women.<sup>17</sup>

Now let me read a symptomatic text by Selina Hossain, a novel depicting Bangladesh during the 1971 war of independence, *The Shark, The River and the Grenades* (1987). I should emphatically point out here that despite her exemplary productivity, Selina remains profoundly ignored in the West, while I submit that her work can be read in the interest of the kinds of feminist struggles that can challenge American Studies to be critical of itself, while marking the “third world” as a site of what I call literary activism.

Before I move on to Selina’s actual work, I intend to take up the question of English as the language of transmission of knowledge insofar as the language question continues to affect Selina’s own work in a number of ways, as it has of course affected Taslima’s works. In Bangladesh, it is very clear that access to English has largely to do with class privilege. Aijaz Ahmad observes, for instance, in his essay “The Future of English Studies in South Asia” that “for certain class fractions developing first in Bengal, and then increasingly in different parts of India, access to the English language, English culture and knowledge that were obtainable through English was very much a part of class and caste mobilities, or rather class mobilities and caste consolidations” (49). But Ahmad also argues for another kind of use of English, one that is not so simply tied to class privilege, but a use of English as “a window on the world” (49), a means for encountering literatures that were written in the English languages, and not only those



from Europe, but also Africa, Latin America, and even South Asian origins. Taslima Nasreen did not write her major works in English; she is in translation. And many of her poems she translated herself, and very sloppily—she was not that interested in the translation aspect. Furthermore, Selina Hossain doesn't write in English. The English translation of her book is poorly done, and thus her work is not taken very seriously in the West. Finally, I should point out that many of the most radical writings in Bangladesh are often written in Bangla, not English, and so there is a lack of range of representations in English.

In regards to the last point, Aijaz Ahmad makes one more observation that I want to look at. He writes of a very different kind of comparative study, one that focuses on the indigenous languages of the Indian subcontinent:

My sense is that what needs to be done a lot is translations across the vernaculars [in India] back and forth, from this to that and to this from that. [...] Once you get to the vernacular languages you will find a body of women's writing that is very different from the body of women's writing that is originally in English. Once you get to the indigenous languages you will find writings from the underprivileged castes of a very different sort. [...] [T]hen you can actually begin a very different kind of comparatism, which is to see how the victims of all this write across India. It is by the assembling of all these that the kind of cultural hegemony for which high, bourgeois, Brahminical, Indian nationalism has been famous in the nineteenth century can actually be contested. Unless we go through all of these steps, literature will not materially become an area of actual class contestation. (54-55)

Ahmad is obviously focusing on India in this passage. But I am similarly inclined to argue that if we look only at literary productions in Bangladesh that have been originally produced in English, we see a very limited range of writings, and mostly those that come from a position of extreme privilege within Bangladesh, while a number of quality and radical literary productions have been written in Bengali but have not been translated into English. In fact, although a few works

of Selina have been translated, most of them are yet to be translated into English.

Now, in order to engage Selina Hossain's own work, I want to draw on an interview that I myself conducted with her in January 2008, an interview which she felt more comfortable responding to in writing, given her limited English and my limited Bangla. (And the written interview thus went through layers of translation and mediation—I wrote my questions in English, and she wrote her responses in Bangla, and then the responses were translated back into English.)<sup>18</sup>

I asked Selina a number of questions related to her writing and her work, and I will interweave some of her responses here as appropriate.<sup>19</sup> For instance, I asked her how she views the woman question in her work. She responded thus: "In my writings, I have wanted to view and engage the woman question within a broad horizon. I don't view the woman question within the contexts of merely domestic violence or sexual relationships within a family" (Hossain, personal interview).

Selina proceeds then in the interview to describe how she takes up the woman question in her novel *The Shark, The River and the Grenades* (1987). This is a novel of the liberation war that has received virtually no attention in the West.<sup>20</sup> The novel is set in a small village (named Haldi in the novel) in the southern part of Bangladesh, and deals with the liberation war as it breaks out in this village, particularly from the perspective of a poor woman, Buri—the protagonist—who has hardly ever ventured beyond the confines of her village. Selina describes her own protagonist thus: "Since childhood, she is a victim of familial inequities, as I call them. She hasn't even gotten a proper name from her own parents" (Hossain, personal interview). In Bengali culture, *huri* is an affectionate term used to refer to young children, but it also means

“old woman.” Indeed, in the first page of the novel, we read of Buri’s unease with her own name:

It vexes her to hear her name called because ‘Buri’ means ‘old woman’ which she doesn’t want to be. If only she had a nicer name: one which makes one happy to hear when uttered and sweetens the ear when spoken about. Sometimes, she argues with her father, weeping on occasion: “Please change my name.” But her father ignores her. She even requests her playmates, “Please, stop calling me Buri,” but they would not listen to her either: “No,” they say, “You are Buri. Buri, Buri, Buri.” (*The Shark* 1)

Selina further describes the story-line of the novel in this way:

She gets married to a widowed, old man who already has two sons. Part of Bengali culture reveals that the relationship between a stepmother and stepchildren is not usually a happy one. But in my novel, I have gone against the grain of this culture of exhibiting an unhappy relationship—I have made it, rather, happy. My purpose here is to enact a sense of humanity against the hegemonic mode of stereotyping and typifying human relationships. (Hossain, personal interview)

I’d like to dwell for a moment on this idea that Selina has brought up in resistance to hegemonic and stereotypical notions of human relationships. This is yet another way that Selina takes up the woman question, by challenging such assumptions. In the novel, Buri is continuously challenging patriarchal hegemony—she constantly disrupts social rules and etiquette. As a girl, she runs through the fields playing with her friends, rather than responding to her mother’s call to help with the chores. When she is a teenager, her father dies. At that point, her older brother Jalil—who becomes her official guardian after their father’s death—insists that she get married off quickly, claiming that “Whatever they do before marriage, once they are married off, women are tamed” (*The Shark* 6). Jalil and her mother arrange a marriage with her first cousin Gafur, who is much older than her. And while she cannot completely escape societal norms and demands—she is married to Gafur, after all, against her own wishes—she is not

“tamed” by the marriage. She does carry out certain duties such as caring for her step-children, but she does not succumb to the typical role of the housewife. She always finds excuses to get out of the house, especially at night, breaking social norms. Buri tells her husband, in fact, one night when they are boating on the river: “This wide open space is my home. My mind is free in the open air” (*The Shark* 8). She cannot, of course, break some rules—she coaxes her husband to go boating with her on numerous occasions in the dead of night. To go boating by herself in the middle of the night would be cause for scandal.

Buri is also enchanted by the life of her friend Nita, a wandering musician who appears in the village from time to time, a woman who vocally resists the institution of marriage, but who shows up at Buri’s house periodically throughout the novel with various “fiancés”. Buri dreams of having the life of a free wanderer like Nita. Before getting married, she dreams of marriage not for the relationship itself, but for the opportunities it might offer her for traveling beyond her small village:

The idea of marriage made her hope only that she might travel to another village, to escape from the prison of boredom in her own village. She longs to be in a different place. Her marriage to a man in a different village would have finally snapped the bonds with Haldi. On her way to a distant land she would sit in a boat, casting a longing glance on the world outside. That would have given her peace. (*The Shark* 4)

But we already have known from the second page of the novel that her life will never be that of a wanderer: “Buri will never have a taste of the world beyond the village Haldi” (*The Shark* 2).

Although Gafur is much older than Buri and she had not wanted to marry him, she grows affectionate towards him, and wants to have a child with him, although she cannot get pregnant.

As Selina explains, “The rural prejudices prompt her to go to the *fakirs* [religiously wise people and religious leaders] for help. Indeed, at one point, she gets pregnant and eventually gives birth to a mentally disabled child” (Hossain, personal interview). This moment in the novel—the moment in which Buri realizes that her child is disabled—is charged with intense grief:

As time passes, Buri notices something unnatural in Rais. His eyes seem to be devoid of life, like a deaf and dumb he seems to look vacantly. Even a sudden sound made just in front of him does not stir him. Buri feels a heaviness inside her. She tries to brush off the suspicion, but can’t. Is the boy going to be deaf and dumb? [...] One day she cannot but give out a cry. “Look, Rais is not responding to me.” The frantic cry seems to Gafur laden with the pain of a human being who has lost all her possessions. (*The Shark* 37)

Rais grows up mute and deaf, with little responsiveness to the outside world. But Buri still finds joy in caring for him as he grows. The war of liberation breaks out in Bangladesh when he is in his teenage years.

At this point in the novel, as Selina explains in the interview, “the life of the protagonist, as portrayed in the novel, gets disrupted and takes a turn. The protagonist begins to nourish the dream of emancipation in her own self, thus extending the self beyond the self by way of politicizing it” (Hossain, personal interview). Indeed, Buri begins to plot ways in which she can participate in the liberation war—she sees no separation between her own liberation and the liberation of her village and of her country. This sense of urgency is increased tenfold after she witnesses the ways in which her step-son was tortured.

Selina’s novel pushes back against dominant narratives of the war of liberation that paint women only as victims of violence. She describes such violence perpetrated by the Pakistani

army in the novel—rape, cold-blooded killing, and torture. But she also describes Buri’s own agency and attempts to strategize her own resistance:

Sometimes she watches soldiers wandering through with guns hanging from their shoulders. But she is not afraid. She suspects that they ignore her, never suspecting her to be a potential enemy. Buri chuckles while gleaning vegetables, they could never imagine the magnitude of fire in her mind that at any moment could ignite and burn them. (*The Shark* 90-91)

At the same time, Selina also captures certain painful moments in the war of liberation, moments in which women are faced with horrible choices that are really pseudo-choices. Take this scene as an example, for instance:

The day Kalim was killed, they all hid themselves in the chest-deep water of a jute field. A group of soldiers were marching on the road nearby. The baby in the lap of Samur’s mother started to cry, and immediately, scared only about their safety, she pushed him beneath the water. When the soldiers had gone away, they came out of the field. The baby had died. Samur’s mother only felt that her baby was dead when she was halfway home. She was mortally frightened when changing the baby from one side of the loin to the other, it felt stiff. (*The Shark* 77)

While Samur’s mother is struck with grief, and feels guilty, wailing “as though she was her own son’s killer” (*The Shark* 78). But really, what choice did she have? If she had just let the baby cry, this could have brought the attention of the Pakistani soldiers, endangering the lives of everyone who hid in the jute field.

Now, the crux of the suspense in the novel is in another such moment in which Buri herself is faced with a horrible choice as a mother—the moment when two freedom fighters seek shelter in her home in order to hide from the Pakistani soldiers who are trying to kill them. She quickly decides to give them shelter, and hides them in a large empty earthen jar. Yet she knows

that the soldiers will soon show up at her doorstep, looking for the two young men, and she is caught in a dilemma:

She cannot decide what to do. Will she stand on the doorstep and stop them? Will she ask them to kill her first before they enter her hut? What response will that bring? Can it save these two boys? She cannot save them at the cost of their own life. She feels like pulling out all her hair. Their lives depend on her, and their lives are valuable. They must remain alive. (*The Shark* 101)

While the Pakistani soldiers are roaming about the village square with a bright search light, pulling all the men out of their houses to search for the freedom fighters, Buri knows she must act quickly if the boys are to be kept alive. She decides in that moment to sacrifice her own son Rais, who is deaf and mute, in the guise of a freedom fighter, so that they will be satisfied and not search her house any longer. This decision breaks her heart: “She only thinks that the boy who cannot join the freedom war, who cannot take revenge for his brother’s death has no right to survive in this world. Thousands of people are being killed, and Rais will die like them. Horrible thoughts fill her brain. Without Rais, Buri’s world will be totally dark” (*The Shark* 102). Yet, knowing that this is the only way to save the two men hiding in her home—distracting the Pakistani army with the wrong man—she sends Rais out into the courtyard with a rifle in his hands, posing as a freedom-fighter:

The sepoys thank Buri in their own language and promise to reward her service to the country. She cannot figure out what they mean and stands still at the door. Rais only looks at the gun in his hands. The men in the courtyard understand nothing about what is going on. No one protests against the gun in the hands of gawky, foolish Rais. Silence reigns. Buri’s eyes burn. The sepoys storm away with Rais, leaving no doubt about what they will do to him. They have captured their prey. Buri feels as if the sepoys are tearing her heart away. [...] Extricating herself from the ring of people, she approaches the corner of the courtyard, and suddenly hears a boom. She runs out. Under the *Jamrul* tree

planted by Kalim, Rais lies in a pool of blood. Buri hugs herself, feeling as if a bomb has blasted her chest away. Rais is a red burning bloom for her. The four sepoys swagger away to the camp. (*The Shark* 103)

Thus, in the act of sacrificing her own son, Buri is able to save the two freedom fighters hiding in her house.

The novel draws to a close in this scene, with Buri sending the two young men off to hide, telling them that they must keep on fighting, and leave quickly so as to avoid being arrested, and so that Rais' death would not go in vain. After they have left, Buri cries out a lament for Rais:

You never called me mother, Rais, I know. After a few moments the soil of Haldi will take you to her breast. You will never call me mother. I will not be longing to hear it. The dream that haunted me in my childhood and youth is destroyed in my old age. Rais, I ached for you. Now I am washing away my pain with your blood. I'm filling in the gap you left, your absence, by laying down my own life. You are safe, having died, leaving me to shoulder your pain. Rais, I am your mother who never heard you call her 'mother'. You cannot guess how I could change. I know I'll live in this world with pain in my heart. But I forget this pain when I know that Haldi is a part of me. The blood of this soil oozes from my skin. Rais, as I have the pride of motherhood, I also have the pride of having been an inhabitant of this village, Haldi. Forgive me. Rais, please forgive me. (*The Shark* 104)

This metaphor of the blood of the soil becoming her own blood, and the land becoming her own body is reinforced in these lines: "Her broken heart is a fertile land silted by unending floods. In the drought it is strong and the green land of her mind has produced a wonderful lotus" (*The Shark* 104). After crying out her lament, Buri kneels down next to Rais, lifting his blood-drenched head and placing it properly on the ground, closing his eyelids. While people swarm around her, her head begins to spin and she faints. In this way, the novel draws to an close. In her



interview, Selina sums up the ways in which she has expanded, broadened, and politicized the role of women in the novel:

[In this novel,] I have shown how the so-called illiterate women can even exemplarily exercise their agency in terms of making the right decision at the right time. In terms of emancipation—in this instance, anticolonial liberation war—the female figure by no means remains passive, but rather active on more levels than men can afford to imagine. She not only acts in various ways, but she also offers imagination and intuition to the point that they all play very politically-significant roles. (Hossain, personal interview)

A fundamental point, then, that Selina Hossain makes in her novel is that women were actively involved in the war of liberation, and had their agency, although such agency operated under severe constraints posed by the patriarchal order of things and by the political economy of inequality affecting women as the ultimate proletariat. Indeed, the question is: What kind of agency is it when a woman is forced to choose between sacrificing the life of her own son or the lives of freedom fighters? It is this very *problematique* of agency that Selina Hossain herself enables us to pay attention to—a fictional, critical moment we can further develop to account for the nature of women's struggles under patriarchy and global capitalism.

### **Mapping out the Contours and Contexts of Literary Rhetorical Critique**

[M]uch of the criticism that has addressed global fiction [...] has worked to avoid an encounter with specifically literary issues, such as those of form and genre. Instead, such criticism often constitutes a demand for representational accuracy.

—Anthony Alessandrini, “Reading Bharati Mukherjee,  
Reading Globalization” (265)

In this chapter, I have tried to discuss the ways in which some Bengali women's texts can be engaged using within the framework of feminist political economy, and with the tools of rhetorical critique. In many ways, this is an endeavor to engage in the discourses of "third world feminisms," in their particular form and content within Bangladesh. But I do not offer here an overarching theory of third-world feminist texts or the kind of macro-theory of representation that Frederic Jameson, for instance, tries to produce when he posits in his article "World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism" that all third-world literature is a national allegory. Aijaz Ahmad's heavy—and, I think, justifiable—critique of Jameson in the article "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" is that Jameson ended up fixing and freezing and inaccurately representing "all" third world literary texts. Ahmed argues, for instance: "I cannot think of a single novel in Urdu between 1935 and 1947 [...] which is in any direct or exclusive way about 'the experience of colonialism and imperialism'" (Ahmad 21). Ahmad's point is not that Jameson should go back to the drawing board to get "the right theory" for third-world literature, but that the project itself is not only impossible but also first-worldist. And the very project of establishing what might be called "Third World Literature" has taken up by Madhava Prasad—who is, however, rather critical of some of Ahmad's points—in his essay "On the Question of a Theory of (Third) World Literature."<sup>21</sup> While Prasad is critical of Western narratives that may serve to objectify third-world writers, he argues that there is the need for a solidarity-from-below across national borders. He writes: "In contrast to the global bourgeois solidarity whose emblem is the 'First World,' the absence of solidarity among the 'differentially integrated' and exploited peoples of the Third World is painfully evident" (Prasad 160).

In line with Ahmad's critique, I am not interested in coming up with a "one size fits all" approach to third-world women's texts. But I also find Prasad's argument rather persuasive—certainly there is a need for drawing connections across national borders in the service of solidarity. Of course, this does not erase multiple layers of unequal power-relations, the most pronounced of which is certainly the relationship between first-world academics and third-world writers. I am reminded here of Gayatri Spivak's conception of "critical regionalism" (*Who Sings the Nation-State?* 91) which I discussed earlier. I also want to take up the question of the vexed history of first-world engagements with "third-world feminism" in the context of Bangladesh in hopes of offering up some new approaches and hermeneutical tools in the service of solidarity.

Now, let me point out that the current "postal" trends with cache in the humanities—postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism—privilege discourse as an object of analysis, and the multiplicity of the sites of the production of power and, for that matter, the ubiquity of power (power is everywhere), so that somewhere in the mix the hard economic realities of the systems of capitalism and U.S. imperialism are lost. After all, hunger and homelessness are not discourse—they are hard material facts—and the power of the U.S. military machine (with a budget over \$660 billion now) can certainly (literally) blow apart the idea that power is everywhere. Therefore, the humanities as a whole would do well to attend to the questions of feminist political economy.

Furthermore, a basic argument I have made here is that the literary and the cultural are always tied to the economic, and thus that literary and cultural criticism cannot be dissociated from political economy. In other words, to dissociate the literary and the cultural from the political economic is to operate within a reductionist, culturalist framework that remains as

limiting as economism itself. I have also dwelt on how certain literary and cultural productions contest various structures of power, such as the World Bank/IMF/WTO, the national bourgeoisie, NGOs and development programs initiated by U.S. companies, and U.S. imperialism itself.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CAPITAL'S CLAWS IN GAS, COAL AND OIL: THE CORPORATE COLONIZATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND MASS-LINE ERUPTIONS IN PHULBARI

Coal under the ground is worth more than growing rice on the surface.

—Gary Lye, chief executive, Asia Energy<sup>1</sup>

Oil, Gas and Mineral Resources of our country is the blood in our veins and we would simply die out if we cannot protect them.

—Anu Muhammad, “Mineral Resources”<sup>2</sup>

What will happen to us if we are forced to move from here? What will happen to our livelihoods? I don't want us to live like this. Our mosques and holy places and the places we were born will be destroyed. What will happen to the graveyards of our ancestors?

—A 75 year-old man who has lived in Phulbari all his life<sup>3</sup>

Resistance movements in Bangladesh—including class and mass-movements and women's movements—have a rich, long, and complex history. In fact, to speak of such movements is to speak of an entire constellation of interconnected economic, political, social, and cultural phenomena and conditions that have historically worked in a number of complex ways to give rise to class-movements or mass-movements. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive account or narrative of such movements, nor is my purpose to provide a singular theory of such movements, but I intend to both narrativize and theorize a specific but symptomatic segment of this history—one that is not only contemporary, but ongoing, and one that foregrounds the questions of structure and agency, theory and praxis, the dialectics of capitalist aggression and anticapitalist resistance, and certainly the question of women being part

of a “national” movement. The movement in question is called the Phulbari resistance movement—a movement that can be traced back to August, 2006.

Before I talk about this movement in the subsequent section of this chapter, I would do well to say a few words about the history of movements in Bangladesh since 1971 in order to make certain theoretical observations. Of course, to begin with, the national liberation movement of Bangladesh in 1971—a movement that I already narrativized and theorized earlier in this study—was a culmination of a series of mass-movements that preceded it—movements such as the language movement of 1952, the six-point mass movement of 1966, and hundreds of protests between 1966 and 1969, giving rise to the famous 1969 *Gono-obhuthhan* movement (literally, “mass movement”) against the military government of the Pakistani military dictator Ayu Khan who was hostile to the people of the eastern wing of Pakistan. This was, indeed, one of the largest mass-movements in the then-East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), given the magnitude of people’s participation across class and gender lines. It was the 1969 mass-movement that significantly paved the way for the 1971 liberation movement.

As was indicated, the 1971 liberation movement contributed to the rise of Bangladesh as a distinct, sovereign nation-state free from the rule of Pakistan. This movement has already been historicized in a number of ways. It has been called a double-decolonization movement by some theorists, Gayatri Spivak included. However, most of the historical narratives of the 1971 movement remain male-centered, as I have discussed earlier.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this movement would not have been possible without the participation of women. Women were not only rape victims in this national liberation movement, but were also active participants. Many women were freedom-

fighters who took up arms and became part of the armed struggle. This national liberation movement was, of course, inspired by the principles of socialism and secularism, while women's issues were still relatively marginalized, if not absent. This marginalization of women's issues right from the beginning had to do with the construction of the nation in predominantly male terms. Indeed, both women and the poor—including the peasantry and the proletariat—in Bangladesh soon found that, after independence, that their agendas and concerns were ignored and even completely subjugated because of the formation of a new national ruling class in Bangladesh that was primarily concerned with its own power.

All this is not to suggest that after 1971 there were no class movements, mass movements, or women's movements. In fact, numerous movements took place between 1971 and today. As far as class movements are concerned, more than a thousand garments workers' movements, jute mill movements, and other working-class movements have taken place in Bangladesh and were, in many instances, repressed by the national ruling classes, while the media did not adequately cover them.<sup>5</sup> Also, there were a number of anti-dictatorship and anti-militarism movements during the periods of military dictatorship in Bangladesh, particularly in the late 1980s when, in fact, the concerted anti-dictatorship urban movement brought about the downfall of General Ershad, who—as a military dictator—ruled the country for ten years.

In other words, there were many urban movements for establishing “true” democracy in the country. Indeed, in the case of most urban movements, the progressive middle class championed the cause of democracy without, however, centralizing the concerns of women and the poor, although the progressive middle class launched their movements against injustice and

oppression in the name of women and the poor. Also, there were several women's movements which repeatedly challenged the patriarchal order of things in Bangladesh at the political and cultural levels, although such movements, again, did not receive much coverage in the mainstream media, nor did they constitute the concerns of male-centered historians. According to a number of Bangladeshi Marxist feminists, a true and comprehensive history of women's movements in Bangladesh is yet to be written. Against this background, then, I want to focus on certain movements in Bangladesh, particularly the Phulbari movement. In fact, I'll begin by providing an account of this movement so that we can examine both its impact and implications in a country where women and the proletariat and the peasantry are all involved in emancipatory movements.

### **Capital's Claws: Global Coal Management in Bangladesh**

The Phulbari movement has involved workers, farmers, left activists, members of various communist parties, and intellectuals, including numerous women, of course. The movement is directed against Western gas and oil companies, hell-bent as they are on exploiting and extracting national resources from Bangladesh, including the American gas company ConocoPhillips. The main (and original) target of the Phulbari movement, however, has been the U.K.-based multinational corporation, Global Coal Management (formerly Asia Energy Corporation). This company is still in the process of attempting to carry out a \$1.1 billion coal mining project that would extract 570 million tons of coal in the Phulbari region of Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup>

This project, if implemented, would displace thousands of people and destroy numerous buildings and structures. The size of the proposed coalmine is 59 square kilometers (or about 37



square miles),<sup>7</sup> equivalent to the size of the Caribbean island of St. Martin. There are disputes about the number of people who are likely to be displaced by the project. Predictably, the estimate made by Asia Energy Corporation was much lower than the ones made by those who were fighting against the implementation of the project. Asia Energy Corporation claims that only about 40,000 people—including 2,500 indigenous people—will be affected by the project.<sup>8</sup> However, the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports came up with a vastly different estimate: according to their report, about 470,000 people will be displaced, including 50,000 indigenous people belonging to Santhal, Munda and Mahali tribes, of 100 villages in Phulbari, Nababganj, Birampur and Parbatipur upazillas. The project would uproot houses and government offices, as well as approximately fifty educational institutions, including six colleges and 18 madrasas and 171 mosques, 13 temples and other religious establishments in the Phulbari region. Furthermore, they argue that the project would cause irreversible environmental harm to the region, given its intended open-pit mining approach.<sup>9</sup>

Now, let me provide a narrative of certain crucial nodes and trajectories in the development of the Phulbari movement. I should point out that this narrative is based on a number of sources, including newspaper reports, interviews with some of the key organizers of the Phulbari movement, and observations from participants themselves.<sup>10</sup> To begin with, coal was first “discovered” in the Phulbari region in 1994 by BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining company, based in Australia and the U.K. BHP Billiton estimated that the Phulbari region contained about 383 million tons of coal.<sup>11</sup> In following years, various groups, including corporations such as Asia Energy Corporation and consultants such as GeoEng Consultants carried out pre-feasibility studies on the extraction of coal from the Phulbari region. An initial

agreement between Asia Energy Corporation and the government of Bangladesh was signed in 1998. This agreement was later hotly contested by the Energy and Mineral Resources Advisor, Mahmudur Rahman, who told reporters in 2005 that “the interest of the country has been compromised with the signing of the agreement with Asia Energy in 1998 and those who had signed the agreement should be tried” (Islam, “Asia Energy asked not to interfere,” par. 4).<sup>12</sup>

In 2004, Asia Energy Corporation announced its intentions to undertake a major coal and power station project in Bangladesh. According to a 2004 news report by the international organization *Mines and Communities*—an organization committed to exposing the social, economic, and environmental impacts of mining on indigenous and land-based peoples—the Bangladesh government did everything it could to attract Asia Energy Corporation and encourage a coal mining deal. The government, in fact, offered the corporation a nine-year tax holiday, low import duties, investment allowances, and no export duties.<sup>13</sup>

By April 2005, the announcement was made public that the Bangladesh Department of Environment had granted an “environmental site clearance” to Asia Energy’s 370 million-ton Phulbari coal project (Tyerman, “Bangladesh boost” par. 1). By July of 2005, Asia Energy reported that the actual reservoir of coal in the Phulbari reservoir was closer to 500 million tons of high-quality coal, enough to generate 8,000 megawatts of power to Bangladesh for as many as 30 years (Khan, “Phulbari Coal Mine” par. 2).

This very estimate of the profitability of the mine has been one of debate, and crystallizes some of the basic conflicts regarding the use of the coal and particularly how it could be used most advantageously for the people of Bangladesh. In Asia Energy’s current proposal, some of

the coal from the Phulbari region would be kept back for use in Bangladesh, while two-thirds of it would be sold abroad. In its own report, Asia Energy claims this will bring an extra \$21 billion to benefit the economy of Bangladesh over the course of 30 years, and add one per cent to its gross domestic product (Deconinck par. 26). Asia Energy's chief executive Gary Lye has argued that there is no point in building the mine unless most of the coal will be exported. In his words, "If you want to have a sustainable new regime of energy development in the country though coal, it has to be economic" (qtd. in Deconinck par. 27). Of course, Asia Energy has already made substantial investments in the project of exporting the coal—since they acquired the mining rights from BHP Billington, they have spent approximately \$20 million in initial exploration and preparation costs.

However, Professor Anu Muhammad, the member-secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports, offers a quite different perspective. While recognizing that Bangladesh needs energy resources like coal, particularly given the fact that the majority of the people in the country do not yet have access to basic electricity, he argues that the coal in the Phulbari region would be most beneficial to Bangladesh if it stayed in the country rather than being exported. In that case, as he estimates, it could serve the population of Bangladesh for 50 or even 100 years, rather than the expected 30-year life span proposed by Asia Energy (Deconinck par. 28).

**Thousands March in the Streets: Mass Uprising, Mass Brutality  
on “Phulbari Day” (August 26, 2006)**

The Phulbari resistance movement emerged in August of 2006, when a committee emerged to organize against Asia Energy, consisting of left-activists, students, academics, farmers, small business owners, and trade union representatives. On August 26, the committee—which has named itself the “National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports”<sup>14</sup> (NCPOGMPP)—led a demonstration of tens of thousands of people (20,000 to 50,000; estimates in the news reports varied) in the district of Phulbari to protest the open coal mining project that had been proposed by Asia Energy Corporation.

As the demonstrators marched toward the headquarters of Asia Energy Corporation, the police and the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles)—a paramilitary force—opened fire indiscriminately on the group which consisted of men, women and children. They killed five people—Tariqul Islam (24), Ahsan Habib (35), Osman (24), Raju (8) and Chunnu (age unknown)—and wounded at least two hundred others.<sup>15</sup> Several eye-witnesses stated that BDR personnel forced Magistrate Abdul Aziz at gunpoint to sign a document which empowered the security forces to open fire on the crowd.<sup>16</sup> However, neither the government nor Asia Energy Corporation accepted responsibility for the murder of civilians who were raising their voices against injustice. And curiously, for once, the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh remained markedly silent after the event, releasing no statement regarding the violent killings carried out in Phulbari.

The killings brought national news attention to the Phulbari resistance movement, while also fanning the flames of agitation against Asia Energy’s project. The NCPOGMPP later

decided to observe this day—August 26—as an annual national day of mourning, calling it “Phulbari Day.” Meanwhile, the Phulbari resistance movement continued to grow, as more people from the surrounding area and across the country joined in further demonstrations which resulted in attacks on Asia Energy Corporation’s central warehouse (that held samples of coal from a number of drilling sites), their information center, and the residences of some of the corporation’s employees. These protests and demonstrations were on the headlines of every major newspaper. Protesters took over the streets of Phulbari, the Dhaka-Dinajpur highway, and a section of the railroad. There were also strikes being held across the country in response to the killings.

Five days later, the organizing committee sat down with government officials to discuss the situation. In the meeting, the government agreed to drop the deal with Asia Energy Corporation altogether (although this promise was, of course, later rescinded) and to drop any plans for open-pit mining in Phulbari or elsewhere in Bangladesh. According to news reports in *The Daily Star* at the time, the energy advisor had indicated to the press that there was no deal with Asia Energy Corporation to continue implementing the program, but there was apparently a deal to study the feasibility of the project. The immediate impact on Asia Energy was that it was forced to suspend its share trading after its share value fell by 59 percent, when the Bangladesh government bowed to the seven-point demands of the Phulbari resistance movement, which were presented by the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports.<sup>17</sup>

Let me crystallize the seven-point demands:

1. All agreements executed with Asia Energy shall be dropped, and the country shall be driven out from Phulbari and the country.

2. [The families of] each of those killed on August 26, 2006 at the hands of law enforcement will be given a financial compensation of Tk. 2,00,000.00 [about \$2,800.00 U.S. dollars].
3. A sum of Tk. 9,00,000.00 [about \$13,000.00 U.S. dollars] will be allotted to financially compensate the wounded persons, the losses to shops and establishments, hotels, restaurants, rickshaws, vans, microphones and households. [They explain their plan for distributing the funds, as well.]
4. A one-man Enquiry Committee comprising the Additional District Magistrate alone has been formed to enquire into the killings of August 26, 2006 and to submit a report. [They determine that appropriate actions will be taken after the report is filed.]
5. An Enquiry Committee [...] will be formed for dealing with the recovery of the dead body or bodies secretly disposed.
6. A memorial tower will be built to commemorate the martyrs in a suitable site by the side of the new Phulbari Bridge.
7. The Superintendent of Police will take appropriate measures against “dalals” (lackeys) of Asia Energy on the basis of specific allegations. All cases and general diaries against the leaders involved in the movement against the coal mine will be withdrawn and no new cases will be brought against them.<sup>18</sup>

According to Anu Muhammad and SM Shaheedullah, in their article “Phulbari Day and the Coal Policy”—which appeared in *The New Age* on August 26, 2007—one year later, few of the demands that had been accepted by the government on August 30, 2006 had been actually carried out. The government had implemented the second and third clauses of the agreement, which had to do with monetary compensation to victims. The first clause had been partially implemented; Asia Energy had been driven out of the Phulbari region—but this was not due to anything the government had done. The corporation was ousted by the people themselves who took part in the Phulbari resistance movement. Regarding point six, Muhammad and Shaheedullah explain that a site was decided and partial funds for the Memorial Tower had been established, but that it had not yet been built. The other points in the demand had not been carried out.

Most importantly, Asia Energy still remained in the country a year later, and the Bangladesh government had still not taken any steps to cancel the deal with Asia Energy.<sup>19</sup> The project remained in limbo for some time at this point, as Asia Energy was undoubtedly continuing to hash out plans with the Bangladesh government behind closed doors. As Anu Muhammad put it, in a comment made to a newspaper reporter: “Although Asia Energy was ousted from Phulbari, it has continued its conspiratorial plan in the country. As part of such a plan, the company has now taken on programmes to exert influence on the media.”<sup>20</sup>

In 2008, an extensive thirty-page report, entitled “Phulbari Coal: A Parlous Project” was prepared by Nostromo Research and the Bank Information Center. Nostromo Research, which was set up by Partizans (People against Rio Tinto and Subsidiaries) in 1996, is a research group that provides professional consultancy to communities adversely affected by the mining industry.<sup>21</sup> The Bank Information Center is an organization that works with groups in third-world countries to influence the World Bank and other international financial institutions (IFIs) to promote social and economic justice and ecological sustainability.<sup>22</sup> These two groups saw it fit to come together on this project, and came to the basic conclusion that the coal mining project proposed by Global Coal Management (GCM)—formerly Asia Energy Corporation—would have widespread devastating effects, and thus should not be carried out. Among their conclusions, they found that the project threatens a number of potential damages. Some of their key points can be summarized as follows. First of all, the Phulbari coal project threatens numerous potential damages such as “the degradation of a major agricultural region in Bangladesh at a time of soaring food prices; pollution of the world’s largest wetlands [the Sundarbans]; and making a significant contribution to adverse global climate change” (30).

Second, Global Coal Management's project gives only vague assurances in its Environmental and Social Impact Assessment. Third, GCM does not have enough practical experience for a project of this magnitude. Fourth, the "Precautionary Principle" and the "Inter-generational Equity" principle would be compromised if the mine operations proceed according to the current design. Fifth, the mine would most likely pollute water and reduce the quantity of water available in the area of the "mine footprint" (30). Sixth, GCM has not adequately assessed the issue of "uncontrolled acid rock drainage" (30) or the risk of an earthquake in the area. Seventh, the project would greatly increase airborne particulate emissions, and would therefore directly impact people's health. And finally, the project managers have not provided adequate evidence that they are capable of ensuring that the proposed rehabilitation measures would actually work, after the mining is completed.

In the early part of 2009, the Bangladesh government proposed a pilot project for implementing the open-pit mining method at an existing underground coal mine site in Boropukuria, which is in Dinajpur, quite close to Phulbari. This proposal is currently stalled, however, because of the pressure from national energy experts to establish a national coal policy before going forward with this endeavor. Nasrin Siraj shares this first-hand report, in fact, regarding the effects of the underground mine in Boropukuria:

In the field the reality is that those villages that sit above the underground coal mine are sinking because of the underground coal extraction. Some cultivable lands changed into low lands and people can no longer cultivate them, even in the winter. In some villages in Boropukuria people sleep under the open sky because their houses are broken and at night the dynamite blasts in the mine worsen the situation. ("The Phulbari Uprising" 2)



The land question, in other words, is very vital to villagers in Bangladesh for whom “land brings bread and dignity,” as Frantz Fanon puts it. To quote Fanon, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread, and above all, dignity” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 44). Of course, the villagers in question are not colonized in the classical sense of the term, but they are certainly under threats posed by the current phase of capitalism, which can be linked to the kind of economic and ecological neocolonialism that Azfar Hussain points out in his essay “Toward a Political Economy of Racism and Colonialism: A Rereading of Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*.” In this essay, Hussain further contends that the contemporary forms of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles decisively but variously involve the land question—the question of life and death, as the Phulbari resistance movement itself clearly suggests.

### **Police Brutality Again: Targeting National Committee Leaders**

On September 3, 2009 the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports once again appeared on the front pages of all the major newspapers in Bangladesh, after they were brutally attacked by police. At least fifty people were injured. Committee members and other activists connected to the Phulbari resistance movement were conducting a peaceful march toward the headquarters of Petrobangla, which is the oil and gas exploration company that is owned by the Bangladesh state. The march was organized in protest to the government’s decision to grant three offshore blocks to the multinational oil companies ConocoPhillips and Tullow Oil, Plc, with a provision allowing them to export up to 80 per cent of the gas.

What garnered the most media attention was the fact that the police violence was very clearly targeted at squelching the Phulbari resistance movement. Key members of the National Committee were clearly targeted. The most prominent figure to be targeted was the Member Secretary of the committee, Professor Anu Muhammad. Muhammad was severely hurt by the police, who beat him with batons, and severely fractured both of his legs.<sup>23</sup> The following image, published in *The New Age*,<sup>24</sup> captures the moment of police brutality against Anu Muhammad, who can be seen here lying on the ground, surrounded by police with batons:



Fig. 2. Policemen charge at economist Professor Anu Muhammad, *The New Age*

Once the news of this report traveled, it sparked further protests against the fascist move of the Bangladesh government, nationally and internationally. In the U.S., over a hundred concerned teachers, students, writers, artists, and activists wrote a collective open letter—which I took part in drafting and circulating—condemning international oil companies in Bangladesh and

the state violence against Bangladeshi activists. The letter stated, for instance, that “the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports has long argued that the government’s drive for plundering its own people’s resources comes at a high price, and lacks forethought about how these resources might benefit the people of Bangladesh instead of multinational companies” (“Oil Companies: Hands Off Bangladesh” par. 2).

While the state clearly had sent the police to intervene in the march to Petrobangla, in their press release, the state ministry declared that the police violence against the demonstrators was “unexpected and sad.” In fact, while he was in the hospital in critical condition, with both of his legs in casts, Anu Muhammad had quite a few calls from VIP visitors within a day or two following the attacks, including a visit from the Health Minister. Despite the fact that the Bangladesh government did not make any moves to cancel the offshore deals with the oil companies, apparently these members of the government determined that it was bad press for the government that Muhammad was appearing in photos in the major newspapers in full casts. Thus, immediately following the visit of the Health Minister, and based on his advice, the doctors at the hospital removed the casts from both of Muhammad’s legs, despite the fact that the bones had not yet healed properly. These were the same doctors who had told him that the casts should be kept on for at least two weeks to allow for the proper setting of his bones.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the police violence, however, the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports continued their protests. They called for a *hartal* (nationwide strike) on September 14. The slogan of the poster for the *hartal* was “*rokto debo jibon debo, tel-gas-koyla dibo na*”—in translation, “we will give our lives and blood but not oil, gas and coal” (Siraj 4). And while the parliamentary committee on energy requested that the

National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports meet with them to discuss the government's decision to lease out offshore gas exploration rights in the Bay of Bengal, they refused to do so unless their demands were met to cancel such deals as well as implement the six demands that they had made in 2006, following the killings that took place in Phulbari. Furthermore, the committee organized their first national convention on October 24, 2009 in Dhaka, in order to garner more widespread support for their movement.

The Phulbari resistance movement is currently ongoing, and since its emergence it has clearly broadened its focus, which was originally coal, to incorporate a much broader agenda of protecting a range of natural resources in the country from exploitation and extraction by multinational companies. Also, the movement continues to bring up the threats posed to certain crucial sites in the country, particularly the commercial ports that the U.S. in particular wants to colonize in the sense that U.S. multinational corporations—along with other Western corporations—want to have their unrestricted access to all possible means of transport that the country's ports can possibly provide, without any tariffs or taxes. In other words, the movement also dwells on the questions of the country's sovereignty and security that are at stake because of imperialist capitalism's (to use Aijaz Ahmad's term) direct interventions in the land of the subaltern. It should be emphatically pointed out that the movement is ongoing, and remains hell-bent on driving away Global Coal Management from the country and on forcing the Bangladesh government to cancel all the deals made with multinational corporations that particularly, if not exclusively, involve the extraction and exportation of the country's natural resources.

## **The Exploitation-Extraction-Export Mantra of Extractive Industries and Connections to U.S. Imperialism**

The projects of companies such as Global Coal Management and ConocoPhillips that aim at the exploitation, extraction, and ownership of natural resources of Bangladesh have been actively supported by the U.S. government, particularly via USAID. As I mentioned earlier, USAID has engaged in its own “development” project of mapping out the natural resources in the country, including gas, coal, clay, peat, alluvium, limestone, and sandstone. This project undertaken by USAID is recorded in its document “Digital Geologic and Geophysical Data of Bangladesh.” Postcolonial theorists have argued that colonialist projects have been, among other things, cartographic projects. In fact, Edward Said has theorized in *Culture and Imperialism* about the need for epistemic mapping in the interest of imperial power/knowledge. In other words, as Edward Said has maintained, empire has produced all kinds of maps to strengthen, expand, and consolidate its power. Today the cartographic practice of imperialism is by no means over, while this epistemic mapping can be seen at the territorial and politico-economic levels. The case of Bangladesh continues to be exemplary in this instance. It has been violently mapped by none other than the U.S. today.

USAID, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), compiled three maps in 1997 as part of its Bangladesh gas resources assessment: the “Geological Map of Bangladesh” (for surface geology assessment of resources such as clay, alluvium, colluvium, limestone, and sandstone), the “Aeromagnetic Anomaly Map of Bangladesh” (for gas resources assessment), and the “Bouguer Gravity Anomaly Map of Bangladeshi” (for measuring the Bouguer gravity anomaly field intensity).<sup>26</sup> It would be useful to quote from the descriptions

provided on the maps themselves. For instance, the description on the “Geological Map of Bangladesh” is as follows:

This map was compiled as part of the Bangladesh gas resources assessment conducted under the Participating Agency Service Agreement (PASA) signed between U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) [...]. The PASA provides for assistance to the natural gas sector pursuant to which the resources assessment was jointly carried out. PASA also encourages transfer of new technology, modeling practices and geoscience theory from existing and established programs in the United States to the Government of Bangladesh, Petrobangla, and Bangladesh academia. (par. 1)

Of course, U.S. imperialism is not just a matter of what the U.S. government does, but it operates on the basis of an orchestrated class-alliance of which I spoke earlier in this study. The national ruling classes of Bangladesh, as was indicated, have been by and large complicit in the project of not only imperial mapping but in imperialism itself. In 1993, the Bangladesh government had announced a petroleum policy that outlined an incentive package for foreign investment in oil and gas, and held a promotional roundtable in Houston to attract investors. By 1995, the Bangladesh government had signed a production sharing contract with the U.S. oil company Occidental (then Unocal). The very contract itself did not go through the proper channels, and was signed without any official bid or solicited negotiations. And then in 1997, there was a massive blowout—called the Magurchhara blowout—in an oilfield due to the negligence of Occidental.<sup>27</sup> However, the oil company avoided paying any compensation for damages, which were estimated later by Petrobangla at around \$685 million (“Khaleda’s Role” par. 7). Furthermore, the Bangladesh government—then led by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia—

made little, if any, attempt to recover compensation for the damages. At best, they filed some letters that requested compensation.

Enacting this logic of class alliance, USAID has also sponsored other projects in Bangladesh that end up serving U.S.-based oil and gas companies. Its Nishorgo Project, which is supposedly an environmental project undertaken to conserve certain protected areas of Bangladesh, but which actually serves the interests of the U.S.-based multinational oil company Chevron, particularly aiding its seismic survey of the gas reserve in Bangladesh.<sup>28</sup>

Another U.S.-based company, ConocoPhillips, has also been interested in exploiting, extracting, and owning natural resources from Bangladesh. As I mentioned above, it is ConocoPhillips who is currently pushing for a “production sharing contract” with the government of Bangladesh, which is referred to in shorthand as “the model PSC 2008” and involves leasing sea gas blocks in the Bay of Bengal to ConocoPhillips for the extraction and exporting of gas. This contract, which was originally drafted by the military-controlled interim government of Bangladesh in 2008, was put on hold after protests arose from a number of sectors across the political spectrum. I already mentioned the protest march conducted by the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports, a peaceful march which ended in police violence. Protests were also held by the Awami League party, who argued that such a contract should be made by an elected government, not an interim one. (And, predictably, once the Awami League came to power in the elections in 2009, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that they would go forward with the plans for the production sharing contract with ConocoPhillips.) Other political groups from both the left and right argued against

such contracts for more fundamental reasons, arguing that the natural resources of Bangladesh should not be up for sale to corporations such as ConocoPhillips.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, the role of U.S. imperialism in Bangladesh—from the perspectives of political economy—becomes evident insofar as the exploitation and extraction of natural resources becomes the monopolizing agenda of multinational corporations that garner support in a variety of ways not only from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the IMF, but also from the White House, whose directives, of course, are carried out by the U.S. embassy in Bangladesh.

One of the most recent developments in the exploitation of gas reserves is the announcement made by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)— an Asian version of the World Bank—in March, 2010 that it has extended a \$266 million loan to Bangladesh in order to “address natural gas supply constraints,” in the bank’s own words.<sup>30</sup> According to the ADB’s own press release regarding this loan, around 200,000 households in the southwest region of Bangladesh will be able to receive gas based on the expanded distribution network that will be developed by the loan. Furthermore, the ADB indicates that vulnerable groups such as women and the poor will benefit from the loan, given the fact that such groups are “currently exposed to harmful air pollution from burning wood and other biomass fuels indoors” (ADB, “ADB Loan to Help Bangladesh” par. 6), although the bank remains silent about corporations causing such environmental harm through air pollution. The rhetoric of the ADB only apparently looks people-centered. Like the World Bank itself, the ADB characteristically emphasizes the need for privatization. In fact, the press release indicates that private firms—and whether those firms are



internal or foreign is not made clear in the press release—will enter into contract with Sundarban Gas Co., Ltd. (which is a new affiliate of Petrobangla) for the purpose of “the operation, maintenance, metering and billing of gas supplied to consumers in the southwest from 2012” (ADB, “ADB Loan to Help Bangladesh” par. 7). We should not forget that Petrobangla already has a history of making anti-people contracts with foreign corporations that have also been routinely favored by international financial institutions, the ADB included.

While my focus here is on Bangladesh, let us not forget that what I have described here is a common occurrence across the third world. The gross violations of human rights and basic freedoms of people, not to mention the exploitation of land and extraction of energy resources by any means necessary—be it oil, gas, coal, or other forms of energy—with no accountability to the people whose land is being exploited is par for the course for multinational energy corporations belonging to the “extractive industries”<sup>31</sup> as they are called—those industries, in other words, that extract energy-resources such as oil, gas, coal, and other resources extracted through mining operations. The violations of Asia Energy Corporation/Global Coal Management, ConocoPhillips, and Unocal/Occidental are just a few examples on a global scale. For instance, John Ruggie, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises stated in his 2006 report that out of the 65 instances of violations of human rights and freedoms reported in the year by NGOs, the “extractive sector” dominated the sample of reported abuses, accounting for two-thirds of the total violations.<sup>32</sup>

Further, I hope I have demonstrated the clear connection that should be made between such corporations and imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism. Just last August (2009), for instance, the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, James Moriarty, met with Commerce Minister Faruk Khan, to reiterate U.S. support to the power sector of Bangladesh. As reported in *The Financial Express*, in this meeting Moriarty reiterated the U.S. government's "co-operative attitude toward the energy sector of Bangladesh, including installation of power plants and exploration of gas."<sup>33</sup> The wording here cries out for a rhetorical critique; the language of "cooperation" is euphemism at its finest. Such a statement covers up the ways in which the U.S. government's position is direct opposition to people's movements and various concerted and ongoing efforts to stop multinational corporations from exploiting, extracting, and exporting Bangladesh's natural resources, particularly the efforts of the Phulbari resistance movement and the work of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports. Furthermore, for the U.S. government to support "exploration of gas" in Bangladesh might sound neutral enough on the surface, but when we know that the exploration being supported is exclusively under the control of multinational corporations rather than the people of Bangladesh themselves, we could argue that the language is anything but neutral.

Currently, there is no international law in place that addresses the issue of corporations' and companies' complicity in violations of human rights, internationally. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, John Ruggie, states, "Much of the relevant jurisprudence to date has come from United States of America's Alien Tort Claims Act (ATCA) cases, which in turn has drawn on evolving international standards of individual criminal liability for such offences" (qtd.

in “Energy kills,” par. 15). The ATCA gets an “F,” however, for the fair resolution of claims. According to the article by the Asian Indigenous and Tribal People’s Network entitled “Energy kills: Phulbari coal mine project of Bangladesh” which appeared in the online journal *Indigenous Rights Quarterly* (2006), of the thirty-six ATCA cases to date that had involved companies, twenty of them were dismissed, three were settled (although none were decided in favor of the plaintiffs), and the rest of the cases were ongoing. In other words, the ATCA has never acted as an advocate for indigenous people in third world countries who have suffered all kinds of human rights violations or even died at the hands of the extractive industry companies. One immediate problem that comes to mind here is the fact that the majority of the extractive industry corporations perpetrating the violations of human rights happen to be U.S.-based.

A fundamental issue here is capital’s drive to exploit all nonrenewable energy sources. Lenin’s argument that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism, in other words, continues to remain relevant today, although this highest stage of capitalism still includes primitive accumulation—or, rather, neo-primitive accumulation—to use Marx’s term, in that even the advanced stage of capitalism calls for brutal extraction and exploitation of natural resources from third-world sites, attempting thereby to displace people and particularly tribal people and peasants from their land. But people themselves are not just silent and dispensable victims. They continue to rise up in the face of capitalism’s massive aggression which, also, indicates the crisis of capitalism itself, suggesting that it prompts resistance continuously. The question always is: how effectively can this resistance be organized and sustained? As a Phulbari resistance slogan puts it, one that I already mentioned: “*rokto debo jibon debo, tel-gas-koyla dibo na*” [we will

give our lives and blood but not oil, gas and coal]. American studies would do well to dwell on the significance of such lives and such blood.

## CHAPTER TEN

### (IN)CONCLUSION: REVISITING CRITICAL INTERNATIONALISM, FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND U.S. IMPERIALISM

Finally, I would like to offer some thoughts on how this project can be further developed in several directions. The project can perhaps be stretched in terms of the application of my rather trinitarian concerns: critical internationalism, feminist political economy, and rhetorical critique within American Studies. Furthermore, I intend to make a few theoretical observations about the current crisis of global capitalism in the context of Bangladesh and the possibilities of activism within and beyond American Studies at the contemporary conjuncture, one in which, of course, we have been witnessing tremendous crisis, but one which also offers some hope for a better, a more just world.

To begin with, despite my deployment of the term “critical internationalism” in this study, I also remain aware of the many problematic ways in which the term has been applied. Furthermore, as I have already maintained, a project which claims to critique U.S. imperialism by way of internationalizing American studies runs the risk of falling into the very paradigm that it critiques, a kind of “academic neocolonialism,” as Bryce Traister puts it in his essay, “The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?,” an essay that appeared in the new journal called *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. However, I think it is a risk worth taking at this point when so much of American Studies is caught in the cycle of naval-gazing culturalism or Hollywood fetishism. Samir Amin puts it rather bluntly when he says in his

essay—and this is the very title of the essay—that “Imperialism and Culturalism Complement Each Other.”<sup>1</sup> And, for that matter, in many instances, American Studies also remains caught up with U.S. exceptionalism and empty invocations of globalization that do not rigorously engage the political economy of capitalism.

As for “critical internationalism,” then, I submit that American Studies would do well to engage and understand the signs of the times that third-world sites like Bangladesh offer. In this project, Bangladesh has been taken as a symptomatic site, if not a decisive one. Of course, there are many other third-world sites that can be critically engaged in the interest of radicalizing and politicizing American Studies itself, from global perspectives—perspectives that continuously challenge not only U.S. exceptionalism but also the microstructures of knowledge/power production in the very domain of American Studies itself as well as globalization studies. In other words, we cannot simply stop at the deployment of the category “critical internationalism,” while we can continuously move in the direction of turning this category into a political one such that it would prompt us to produce activist scholarship and scholarly activism, to use T.V. Reed’s dialectically-engaged formulations, in the interest of feminist, anticapitalist, antiimperialist, and antiracist activism.

As far as activism is concerned, of course I, for one, strongly think that scholarship in American Studies needs to learn a great deal continuously from actually-existing mass movements in various countries across the world, with a particular focus on what Lenin calls “weak links” in the chain of imperialism that one can locate today in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Of course, there are all kinds of ways in which we theorize. But there are theories that

primarily depend on readings of texts which, of course, are important. I have, in fact, done so in this study. However, theories can also move beyond texts in the traditional sense, to take cues and to process raw material from actually-existing movements. Of course, processing such raw material runs the risk of anthropologism, of which I have spoken earlier and have been critical. In other words, critical self-reflection and acute awareness of one's own position and location are also important practices that should be made integral aspects of "critical internationalism" itself. To the extent that movements remain messy and unfinished—and even contradictory—in a number of instances, we can only offer theories without guarantees, to invoke Stuart Hall. Yet such a situation, I argue, is not by any means hopeless in that the unfinished is always full of possibilities—possibilities that are suggested by the very existence of such movements as the Phulbari resistance movement, for instance, among many other mass-movements that continue to challenge the micro-structures and macro-structures of power and domination such as capitalism, imperialism, racism and patriarchy.

In point of fact, I want to focus on Maria Mies' own search for a new vision of the world in her work *Search for a New Vision*, particularly in her chapter entitled "Women's Work, Globalization and a 'Sustainable Society.'" Although she formulated it through her interactions with poor rural and urban women at a workshop on sustainability in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the vision has recently been taken up further by Bengali feminists such as Farida Akhter. In other words, that vision is still relevant and offer some further talking-points for our understanding of the current problems and possibilities surrounding the oppressed and the subaltern. I would like to quickly rehearse some of the high points of the vision in question. First, since the majority of the people in third-world countries—including Bangladesh—still depend on agriculture, what is

called the “peasant question”—one that was taken up by a number of third-world revolutionaries, from Mao to Che—cannot be swept under the rug in the name of the advanced stage of capitalism. Indeed, capitalism itself has variously and adversely affected agriculture, impoverishing millions of people and turning them into landless laborers and even into the lumpenproletariat. Keeping these issues in view, feminists such as Maria Mies and Farida Akhter circulate this slogan: “Agriculture before industry.” They suggest that as food still comes out of the earth, sustainable agriculture cannot be based on the industrial model and global agrobusiness. Indeed, the “small peasants” must be strengthened because many more people can work in the domain of agriculture.

To speak of agriculture is to speak of land reform. Feminists such as Maria Mies and Farida Akhter have strongly suggested the need for land reform with utmost attention to ecological considerations. Although this is not the place to talk about the entire range of ecological considerations, I would do well to refer to a groundbreaking work called *Ecofeminism* (1993) by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, a work that suggests that feminist struggle and ecological concerns must be taken up in tandem in order to effectively challenge the patriarchal and racist violence perpetrated by capitalism. Furthermore, the collection *Globalization and Ecofeminism*, edited by Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen, also advances this project. Maria Mies further engages the question of producer-consumer cooperatives, an interesting idea, one that—according to her—“will not only guarantee the small producers a regular income but will also contribute to a reduction of ecologically dangerous agricultural inputs like pesticides” (*Search for a New Vision* 277). She also emphasizes the principles of self-reliance and food security, suggesting that they would call for much smaller, decentralized economic regions. She



brings up the question of “bio-regions” here, indicating that they would be able to produce what is necessary for basic survival in that region. To quote Mies, “[t]rade and import will play a secondary and additional role. People will export what they produce over and above the satisfaction of their basic needs. They will not starve while they produce luxury items for the affluent” (*Search for a New Vision* 277).

A number of third-world feminists thus have envisaged new global links. Maria Mies draws upon their works and emphasizes it. What do these new global links mean? They cannot be regionalist, either. I should point out here that for me, as it is for Maria Mies, anti-globalization or anti-imperialism does not mean anti-global interactions or anti-internationalism. If global interactions themselves produce and reproduce unequal power-relations and production-relations, then it is necessary that we not only challenge but also reconfigure those interactions that have hitherto uncritically celebrated globalization. It is in this combative, anti-regionalist but internationalist spirit that I myself envisage, like Maria Mies, new global links. They will, of course, follow the principal of self-reliance. In other words, it would lead to a shrinking of global trade, of transport costs, of packaging, as well as of waste. As Maria Mies puts it, “[m]ore or less self-reliant societies in the South will necessarily lead to a restructuring of the industrial societies in the direction of more diversified economies” (*Search for a New Vision* 277).

What is even more crucial from the perspective of a feminist political economy—one that this study has articulated at some length—is the new configuration of world trade which could be based on the principle of fair trade, as Maria Mies points out. This means that we need to have a new conception of value based on equality. In other words, work everywhere must have the same

value, while thus the very idea of “cheap” labor—which is predominantly the labor-power of women of color in third-world countries under the current global economic system—will disappear once and for all.

Again, drawing upon the works of a number of third-world feminists and activists, Maria Mies brings up the questions of bio-regionalism, decentralization, and close rural-urban links. Such links would involve the restructuring of the very relationship between the two fundamental categories of political economy: production and consumption. Taking cues from the third-world feminists she engages, Maria Mies puts it this way: “[a]s house work, communal work, ecological work will have the same status as wage-labour, much more work will be available nearby” (*Search for a New Vision* 278). Indeed, this is what I treat as the new conception of work that itself remains fundamentally opposed to the patriarchal accounting of labor and its brutal exploitation by capital.

No less significantly, many third-world feminists from Brazil to Bangladesh bring up the idea of reclaiming the commons, including ecological resources such as water, air, land, forests, deserts, oceans, and even life itself. What is of particular importance is the focus on an anti-capitalist notion of knowledge-production: the collective knowledge of a people are not for sale, or open to privatization and commodification. In other words, the collective knowledge of a people should have a common use-value—even an infinite use-value—but not a capitalist exchange-value. Furthermore, challenging the tyranny of the law of value, the question of political economy must be re-posed in contradistinction to the capitalist notion of money. That is to say, money—according to those third-world feminists—must be used as a means of

circulation, or as an instrument of exchange only, not as a means of brutally unequal accumulation that we observe today, the kind of accumulation that has created today an unprecedented global economic crisis.

Mies observes that while these values, principles, and structures require an entirely different approach than the existing mainstream anthropology, cosmology and epistemology, this process of restructuring the world towards what she calls a “subsistence perspective” (*Search for a New Vision* 278) is already underway in many grassroots movements in the global South, such as the Phulbari resistance movement in Bangladesh. It is true, however, that we are far from achieving the kind of world we dream of. But to quote Arundhati Roy: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.” My own dissertation marks only a small moment of participation in this massive, ongoing struggle for a just and fair world.

Finally, I offer my own poem,<sup>2</sup> a poem of struggle and hope, one that has already found certain theoretical and narrative moments of articulations in this study:

### **A Song of Love, A Song of War**

*I was telling you a story about love  
how even in war it goes on speaking its own language  
—Adrienne Rich*

Most days, I cannot bear to turn on the news  
the stories of violence, of destruction  
are different now, after her birth—

sending shock waves through my womb.  
So instead I hold my baby in my arms,  
sleeping now against my breast,  
content, full with milk,  
her fingers curled around mine.  
There is no communication more perfect than this.

Our breath rises and falls together in the twilight,  
the silence only broken by a lone blue jay who sings  
outside the window, his own song of love or of regret.

I hum a song, touch the fuzz of her hair,  
and wonder: how we will speak out of the  
silences that clutch us—  
how to begin  
in the frightful day  
with words that can be tangible  
and nourishing as  
bread and soup, the common cup?  
How to do what we need for our living, everyday?

How to name the fear that  
tightens its long tail around the torso  
of ignorance, indifference, indolence  
in this country?

If we do not name it, it will crush us.

How to make paths that do not destroy us,  
to believe in the simple miracles of humanity, of peace,  
to press our hands firmly against the earth  
to believe that answers move there,  
waiting to be reborn?

How to explain that they will not come through the ways we have known,  
treacherous paths taken by the men who say they lead us  
through wars on terror, Wall Street bailouts, homeland security,  
while most of us are left spinning in our own fear and isolation.  
Will shopping really save us?

How to find ways to be alive in the twenty-first century  
when we know there are reasons for the fears  
but not the ones they tell us?  
Not the Iraqis, the Afghanis, the Palestinians,  
not the immigrants, the blacks, the gays, the poor.

And there are answers  
that we won't hear from the news anchors.  
Swirling in the womb of the earth below us,  
they have nothing to do with fear,  
and nothing to do with war.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER ONE:

#### KNOWLEDGE THROUGH WESTERN EYES: MOVING CLOSER

#### TO MY OWN TRUTH AND DREAD

<sup>1</sup> UBINIG engages in policy research for development alternatives. On its website, the group defines itself thus:

UBINIG is against all forms predatory interventions and hierarchical relations that destroy conditions of life and its joyous manifestations and forecloses the emergence of the authentic global community. We are part of the global movement working in Bangladesh against caste, class, patriarchy and all forms of coercion, oppression and hierarchy of control, manipulation and surveillance by a few against us all.

Some of Farida Akhter's recent writings can also be found on UBINIG's website, which is at <http://www.ubinig.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> While I use the organizing term "third world," I do so with caution, realizing that to blur the specificities of different countries and peoples in one monolithic category of "third world" can be devastating in creating false self/other binaries. Certainly, there can be a third world in the first world, and *vice versa*. Yet I also realize the usefulness in seeing the ways that global structures of imperialism, colonialism, and racism tend to emanate from the seat(s) of "first world" power in order to control, devastate, and plunder the "third world." Chandra Mohanty argues, in *Feminism Without Borders*, that "'Third World' retains a certain heuristic value and explanatory specificity to the inheritance of colonialism and contemporary neocolonial economic and geopolitical processes that other formulations lack" (144). Mohanty, however, has replaced this term in her vocabulary for the terms "One-Third World" and "Two-Third World," which she argues is more representative of social minorities and social majorities ("One-Third Two-Thirds World 42). But I choose to continue to use the term "third world," while recognizing the problems and weaknesses of such a term. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, for a particularly riveting account of the damage the first world colonizers have done to the third world, or the colonized. Also, see Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Arturo Escobar provides a thorough discussion of the use of the term "third world" in his book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Escobar argues:

As an effect of the discursive practices of development, the Third World is a contested reality whose current status is up for scrutiny and negotiation. [...] After the demise of the Second World, the Third and First worlds necessarily have to realign their places and the space of ordering themselves. Yet it is clear that the Third World has become the other of the First with even greater poignancy. [...] The term will continue to have currency for quite some time, because it is still an essential construct for those in power. But it can also be made the object of different reimaginings. (214-215)

In consonance with Escobar, I use the term “third world” critically with the understanding that it has indeed become the “other” of the first world, but that the term still holds the possibilities for a different vision, one that would push back against the current structures of power and oppression.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion and overview of this case, see PZ Myers’ essay, “Melissa Hussain committed Thought Crime!”

<sup>4</sup> As a side note, I also had a very interesting experience in receiving some legal advice regarding the hate mail in a very roundabout way. In a rather strange, postmodern moment, I happened to be chatting online with a friend from North Carolina about the case of the (other) Melissa Hussain, when he told me that the local radio station he was listening to was suddenly talking about me *at that very moment*, and the fact that I had been receiving misdirected hate mail online, mail that had been intended for the other Melissa Hussain. On that particular day, the show “The State of Things,” hosted by Janet Babin and Susan Davis (Feb. 23, 2010), was devoted to the topic of “Social Media in the Workplace,” focused on the case of the other Melissa Hussain and the implications this had for people who use social media such as Facebook in the workplace. A caller (an acquaintance of mine, as I realized later) asked the guest lawyer on the show about what legal recourse I might have for such misdirected (and some not-so-misdirected) internet hate mail, and in the discussion that ensued, the lawyer’s response was that there is basically not much that can be done to counter internet hate mail, legally, unless someone makes a direct threat of bodily harm that can be then followed up by the police. The online audio archive for the show can be found at <http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/sot0223Newabc10.mp3/view>.

<sup>5</sup> This statement appears in the comment section in response to the article posted on WITN.com, entitled “Teacher Suspended After Facebook Post” (Feb. 16, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, in fact, lays the foundations of what has come to be known as postcolonial studies in the metropolis by advancing the very notion of “Orientalism” in his major work *Orientalism*—also a superb, outstanding intervention in the field of area studies such that the

very conceptions of knowledge-producing and homogenizing area studies have been shaken. Also, *Orientalism* has revolutionized the ways in which colonial discourse analysis has come into being. In *Orientalism* Said advances several overlapping definitions of Orientalism. Taking cues from each definition, I will characterize Said's notion of Orientalism as an ontological and epistemological system of stereotypical representations of the "East" by the West—representations that produce, reproduce, legitimize, and naturalize the knowledges as well as the images of the "East" such that the West could control, govern, manipulate, and continue to re-create and even invent the "East" in its own interest. See *Orientalism* (1-10). In *Covering Islam*, Edward Said uses his theory of Orientalism while empirically documenting the workings of the Western media that have homogenized, misrepresented, and even blatantly distorted Islam, Muslims and the Arab world.

<sup>7</sup> Lorde made this observation in her speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," which is included in her collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider* (112).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, *The Post-Development Reader*, edited by Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree.

<sup>9</sup> See Azfar Hussain, *The Point is to (Ex)Change It: Towards a Political Economy of Land, Labor, Language, and the Body*.

<sup>10</sup> Merata Mita's statement, which originally appeared in her essay entitled "Merata Mita On..." (*New Zealand Listener*, Oct. 14, 1989, p. 30), is cited in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (58).

<sup>11</sup> In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt is highly critical of Western travel writing, and through her conception of "transculturation," she argues that the imperial metropolis "habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis—beginning, perhaps, with the latter's obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself" (6).

<sup>12</sup> Pratt describes her conception of the "contact zone" in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*: "'contact zone' is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term 'contact,' I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness or apartheid,



but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (7).

<sup>13</sup> There are many studies of Bangladesh of the anthropological sort. For examples of a linguistic anthropological approach, see “The Kalimah in the Kaleidophone: Ranges of Multivocality in Bangladeshi Muslims’ Discourses” and “The Poetics of ‘Madness’: Shifting Codes and Styles in the Linguistic Construction of Identity in Matlab, Bangladesh,” both by James Wilce.

<sup>14</sup> Karim uses this concept in a particular way, given her location in the diaspora as a Bengali feminist. In an e-mail exchange with Lamia Karim, I asked her about how she negotiates her ties to activist feminist politics in Bangladesh, while being based in the U.S. and—on a fundamental level—how she strives to make activism integral to her scholarly work. In her response, she wrote: “Activism like research is a process, and we have to approach it as a ongoing/transforming relationship. Of course, I do not share the burdens of my activist colleagues in Bangladesh, hence I have to be careful. I also share many struggles with communities of color in the US, and I live and work in the US. No easy answer” (Feb. 2010) I think Karim raises some excellent points that is likely to be relevant for many third-world feminists of the diaspora. There is a double-commitment to feminist politics back home, while also a sense of solidarity with the struggles of people of color within the first world.

<sup>15</sup> While I discuss the Phulbari movement at greater length later, let me briefly explain that this movement emerged with full force in September 2005, when thousands of people staged a demonstration against open-pit coal mining in Phulbari, a district of northwest Bangladesh. The London-based company Asia Energy Corporation (which has since renamed itself as Global Coal Management) had been drilling in the area, which has an estimated deposit of 500 million tons of coal. The people of Phulbari and nearby areas opposed the open pit mining, as it would result in the displacement of approximately 500,000 people in a 40 square-kilometer area. Since 2005, the movement has gathered momentum and has taken on a wider focus against multinational corporations that are interested in extracting energy reserves (such as oil, gas, and coal) from Bangladesh, including the American petrochemical company Conico-Phillips. For a news report on the emergence of the Phulbari movement, see the article “Thousands protest ‘open pit’ coal mining in Phulbari” (*The Daily Star*, Sept. 26, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Ahmad’s *In Theory*; E. San Juan, Jr.’s “Postcolonialism and the problematic of uneven development”; Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes”; Benita Parry’s “Problems in current discourse theory” and Azfar Hussain’s *The Point is to (Ex)Change It: Towards a Political Economy of Land, Labor, Language, and the Body*.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the development of fascism in the United States today, see my essay, “A Citizen’s Guide to Neo-Fascism in the US, Post-9/11” in the collection *Battleground States: Scholarship in Contemporary America* (2007), edited by Stephen Swanson, Michael Lupro and Sarah Tebbe.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of how USAID has charted out the natural resources of Bangladesh (2001), see the two maps by Persits, et al, including the one entitled “Geological Map of Bangladesh” (for clay, alluvium, colluvium, limestone, and sandstone assessment) and the one entitled “Aeromagnetic Anomaly Map of Bangladesh” (for gas resources assessment), both of which are available on the U.S. government’s own online publication archive, entitled “Digital Geologic and Geophysical Data of Bangladesh.” See Persits, et al. or the following link for direct online access to the maps themselves: <<http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1997/ofr-97-470/OF97-470H/>>. These maps have been included in the appendix to this study, as Appendix C and D, respectively.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THEORY AND METHOD, PART I: INTERNATIONALIZING AND STRETCHING THE TERRAIN OF AMERICAN STUDIES

<sup>1</sup> In a number of places throughout her oeuvre, and particularly in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak introduces and theorizes her by-now well-known term “sanctioned ignorance.” According to Spivak, this is the kind of ignorance that does not merely call attention to itself as a fact but something that bespeaks the power of the “Western” subject who does not need to know anything that he or she finds irrelevant or unnecessary. This kind of ignorance, according to Spivak, contributes to the production of the “Western” subject as the norm by which the rest of humanity is even measured. See *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, chapter 13: “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies” (255-284).

<sup>2</sup> While Reed focuses on the benefit rock concerts that followed the Concert for Bangladesh, his observations about such concerts are relevant here. In chapter six of *The Art of Protest*—entitled “‘We Are [Not] the World’: Famine, Apartheid, and the Politics of Rock Music”—Reed provides a politically significant and useful reading of the cultural politics of “rock and roll activism,” particularly of benefit concerts of the 1980s that were organized around issues such as the apartheid of South Africa, famine in Africa, the environment, AIDS, and political prisoners.

<sup>3</sup> In chapter two I discuss in more depth the politics surrounding USAID's withholding food aid to Bangladesh during the famine of 1974. Also see Rehman Sobhan's *The Crisis of External Dependence*, Emma Rothschild's essay "Food Politics," and Devinda Sharma's essay, "Famine as Commerce."

<sup>4</sup> See the chapter called "Who are the owners of Bangladesh Economic Reform and Development Policies?" in Muhammad, *Development or Destruction?* (71-90).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the rhetoric of democracy in U.S. politics, see Siskanna Naynaha's dissertation entitled "Race of Angels: Xicanisma, Postcolonial Passions, and Rhetorics of Reaction and Revolution."

<sup>6</sup> Pfister discusses the ways in which British cultural studies in the 1950s-60s was committed to social change. He also provides a brief sketch of some American intellectuals who have modeled the kind of intellectual he sees as socially useful, such as Robert Lynd, C. Wright Mills, F.O. Matthiessen, and Richard Ohmann. See *Critique for What?*, pages 4-17.

<sup>7</sup> In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci introduces the terms "the conjunctural" and "the organic" in this particular passage:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural [or organic] contradictions have revealed themselves . . . and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the "conjunctural," and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize. (178)

Also, John Bellamy Foster discusses Gramsci's notion of "the organic" and "the conjunctural" in a book review article in *Monthly Review* (1989) in these terms:

By distinguishing in this way between the organic and the conjunctural aspects of an enduring crisis, Gramsci highlights the fact that the terrain of struggle in a period of continuing instability is never simply a direct reflection of the general crisis of the system, but is also conditioned by the formative response of the ruling class to that crisis. And since it is safe to assume that the nature of this ruling class response is myopically guided by its endeavor to preserve and extend its own hegemonic position, and not by the objective requirements of economic and social progress as such, it is quite possible for a dominant class to resort to what, from a wider social perspective, are clearly irrational and contradictory solutions to the impasse in which it is placed, leading to far greater problems in the future. Hence, even in those cases where the ruling class has the power to implement its own preferred solution to a secular crisis, the shifting terrain of struggle

over a longer period of time may favor the subaltern strata of society. (“Restructuring World Economy” par. 3)

<sup>8</sup> I use terms like “counterhegemonic” or “hegemony” in the Gramscian sense here, meaning that hegemony is both cultural and political. Although metropolitan academics have often read Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” as monolithically cultural, Gramsci himself explains that hegemony is *both* cultural consent *and* political coercion. See, for example, the section on Gramsci entitled “Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State,” pages 210-16 in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, edited by John Storey.

<sup>9</sup> Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” advances important critiques of the western feminist “gaze.” Gayatri Spivak also criticizes western feminism’s complicity with imperialism in her essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Spivak’s criticism has also been taken up in Julia Emberley’s *Thresholds of Difference* (1993), Laura Donaldson’s *Decolonizing Feminisms* (1992) and Kamala Visweswaran’s *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994).

<sup>10</sup> Gayatri Spivak highly nuances and—according to some—even politicizes Gramsci’s notion of “the subaltern,” while also rendering it slippery for multiple appropriations in the entire realm of postcolonial studies. Spivak’s arguments in this essay have variously been commented on and critiqued, and there are always the problems of summarizing her argument. However, a couple of crucial points can be briefly tabulated here. First, Spivak speaks of the gendered subaltern in the context of the international division of labor, one whose voice and agency are not simply absent but are denied because they are not heard in the thicket of dominant Western discourses. Spivak doesn’t suggest that the subaltern cannot speak at all. Rather, she suggests that the subaltern cannot speak in the sense that she is not heard because of the dominance of Western discourses that deny the female subaltern the agency she has. Indeed, how can the subaltern speak when the dominant discourses are continuously deleting, marginalizing, or even violating the subaltern in all sorts of ways? However, Gayatri Spivak does not fully do away with the politics of representation, despite her poststructuralist stance. But she emphasizes the kinds of representations that remain vigilant about and continuously challenge capitalist, imperialist, and patriarchal appropriations. I use the term “subaltern” partly in the Spivakian spirit, while remaining cautious about its misappropriation. For a discussion of the voice and voicelessness of the subaltern under colonialism and capitalism, see Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the term “coca-colonization,” see Wagnleitner’s *Coca-colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after World War II*. In

this book, Wagnleitner analyzes the post-World War II dynamic between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, particularly the struggle for control of Austrian culture. Also, for a discussion of the transmission of American culture abroad, and the ties to global capitalism, see *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, edited by Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean.

<sup>12</sup> In *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, Rowe further argues that “what often distinguishes U.S. cultural responses from British and French views in the same period is the tendency of U.S. writers and intellectuals to be stridently anti-colonial with respect to other imperial powers while endorsing, sometimes even helping to formulate, U.S. imperialist policies” (4). This has to do with hegemony, I would argue, which I discuss later in this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> A number of third-world theorists and political economists, from Samir Amin to Aijaz Ahmed to Badruddin Umar to Martin Khor to Azfar Hussain, have critiqued the term “globalization,” while suggesting that globalization is a euphemism for the latest stage of U.S. imperialism. For instance, Amin asserts: “Now that ‘really existing socialism’ and third world radical populism have met their ruin, imperialism is once again on the offensive. The ‘globalization’ thesis proclaimed so arrogantly by the current ideology is nothing but a new way in which the inherently imperialist nature of the system asserts itself. In this sense, it can be said that ‘globalization’ is a euphemism for that forbidden word, imperialism” (*Spectres of Capitalism* 45). Also, Martin Khor tells us: “globalization is what we in the Third World have for several centuries called colonization” (qtd. in Waters 94). Azfar Hussain maintains, “[o]ne can indeed argue that globalization is a euphemism for the production and reproduction of the entire macrologics of power/production networks such as capitalism, imperialism/colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and so on—for that matter, globalization is a euphemism for the acceleration and expansion of dearth, damage, disaster, destruction, and even death for the oppressed of the world” (*The Wor(l)d in Question* 162). Also see Badruddin Umar’s *Palestine Afghanistan O Iraq-e Markin Samrajjobad* [U.S. Imperialism in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq]; Samir Amin’s *Spectres of Capitalism*; and Aijaz Ahmed, *Lineages of the Present*.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the “core/periphery” pair, see, for instance, Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World System*. Andre Gunder Frank uses another pair in an analysis of Latin American political economy: “metropolis/satellite.” See, for instance, Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. Azfar Hussain also provides a brief gloss on the “core/periphery” pair by way of invoking other authors:

Probably Edward Shils, in his book *Center and Periphery*, mobilizes the pair most thoroughly in ways in which it attracts the attention of political economists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians in the west. Amin’s deployment of this pair has, however,

a long history that precedes Wallerstein's deployment of it. According to Amin, the core countries include the dominant triad and other European countries, while the periphery represents countries in the third world (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), broadly speaking. However, according to Amin, the core/periphery relationship cannot be construed mechanically but in terms of international relations of production and power. Thus, for him, the core/periphery relationship keeps shifting in response to geographical-historical specificities and differentials. Amin even goes to the extent of employing the term "periphery of the periphery" while describing countries like Bangladesh. (*The World in Question* 163)

For the use of this term, see Amin's *The Future of Maoism* (75).

<sup>15</sup> In "Nation, Globe, Hegemony: Post-Fordist Preconditions of the Transnational Turn in American Studies," Leerom Medovoi provides an interesting critique of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, arguing that while their analysis is sophisticated, their conception of empire ends up reproducing its own version of the future-tense globalization narrative. By "future-tense globalization narrative," Medovoi means that the ideology of globalization is seen as constantly moving toward some future moment, not dwelling on a fixed sense of the past as the nationalist rhetoric of Fordism did. However, he argues that Hardt and Negri do help us a great deal in describing the ways in which the US is enabled by global regulatory institutions to construct a global hegemony and not just maintain or expand its empire. Medovoi reads Hardt and Negri through a Gramscian lens: "Reconceiving Hardt and Negri's Foucauldian analysis of the circulation of global power from such a Gramscian perspective, 'empire' would appear to offer a name for what the United States hopes to achieve by positioning itself as the central agent in an emergent 'world historic bloc' that will manage the very global institutions now under construction" (177).

<sup>16</sup> See Azfar Hussain, *The Point is to (Ex)Change It*.

<sup>17</sup> I also want to point out that—curiously enough—the Americas outside of the United States more often than not tend to get left out of *American Studies*. But when I speak of internationalizing American Studies, I am interested in making certain critical connections between the U.S., Central America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, particularly those connections that can be made via the tools of feminist political economy. For instance, in my book *Poetics, Politics, and Praxis: Rereading Audre Lorde and Julia de Burgos*, I explore the dialectic between the politico-economic and the cultural, and between American studies and the Caribbean by way of rereading two poets: the Puerto Rican feminist-anticolonial poet Julia de Burgos and the African-American lesbian-feminist poet Audre Lorde.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### THEORY AND METHOD, PART II: FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY AND RHETORICAL CRITIQUE AS INROADS TO AMERICAN STUDIES

<sup>1</sup> In their book *Introduction to Political Economy* (which is now in its fifth edition), Sackrey, Schneider and Knoedler arguably provide the most readable and accessible text available today for students of political economy. Their introduction offers a lucid explanation of the difference between mainstream economics and political economy, and of why political economy functions as a challenge to mainstream economics. Also, chapter eight, “U.S. Monopoly Capitalism: An Irrational System?” provides an excellent critique of the current U.S. capitalist system. One thing I should point out, however, is that Sackrey, Schneider, and Knoedler do not take up the question of gender, or discuss a feminist approach to political economy.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Fifteen Jugglers*, T.V. Reed offers an interesting analysis of Sandoval’s project, particularly her concept of “oppositional consciousness.” Reed describes her work thus:

In Sandoval’s specific example, women of color have always had to engage to one degree or another in a complex negotiation of identities or layers of identity in order to survive in the interstices of straight, white, male power. Like W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of “double consciousness,” Sandoval’s argument acknowledges that multiple subjectivities are virtually structured into the consciousness of those “othered” by the dominant. But she suggests that realization of an “oppositional consciousness” is achieved only through active political engagement in which identities shift to fit specific, tactical, and strategic needs, possibilities, and limits. Oppositional consciousness entails a constant creation and re-creation of identity, but it is a far more active and self-conscious form of being than that conceptualized as the decentered subject. It is less a question of being centerless than of having multiple tactical centers from which to resist both marginalization and the co-optive centerings offered by dominating forces. (150)

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Azfar Hussain’s essay, “Reading Spivak and Sandoval Reading the World.”

<sup>4</sup> For a book-length discussion of Rosa Luxemburg’s socialist feminist perspectives, see Raya Dunayevskaya’s *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution*.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Clara Zetkin's theory of women's emancipation, see chapter two of Maria Mies' *Search For a New Vision*, entitled "Marxist Socialism and Women's Emancipation: The Proletarian Women's Movement in Germany 1860-1919" (41-77).

<sup>6</sup> In *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, Manning Marable primarily foregrounds the relationship between the structures of racism and capitalism in the context of the United States, but Marable also discusses how patriarchy, racism and capitalism are interlinked, in chapter three: "Groundings with my Sisters: Patriarchy and the Exploitation of Black Women" (69-103). In *The Political Economy of Racism*, Melvin Leiman devotes one (albeit very short) chapter to the relationships between gender, class, and racial discrimination. See his chapter seven: "Notes Toward a Comparison of Gender and Race Discrimination" (336-343).

<sup>7</sup> For various discussions of feminist political economy and for that matter, for discussions of how family or home turns out to be a crucial site of exploitative production-relations and power-relations, see such articles as Carmen Diana Deere's "What Difference Does Gender Make? Rethinking Peasant Studies," Nancy Folbre's "'Holding Hands at Midnight': The Paradox of Caring Labor," Barbara R. Bergmann's "Becker's Theory of the Family: Preposterous Conclusions," Shelly A. Phipps' and Peter S. Burton's "Social/Institutional Variables and Behavior within Households: An Empirical Test using the Luxembourg Income Study," all published in the special inaugural issue of *Feminist Economics*. Also see Cynthia Enloe's essay "Womenandchildren: making feminist sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis," an essay in which Enloe coins the term "womenandchildren" in order to indicate the family and kinship units in the constructions of national identity that are based on naturalized sexual divisions of labor—the men protect the "womenandchildren."

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the movement of female labor-power across national borders, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, in their edited collection *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, & Sex Workers in the New Economy*, describe the ways in which workers are transported from the so-called third world to the first, exposing what they call the "female underside of globalization":

[There is] a far more prodigious flow of female labor and energy: the increasing migration of millions of women from poor countries to rich ones, where they serve as nannies, maids, and sometimes sex workers. In the absence of help from male partners, many women have succeeded in tough "male world" careers only by turning over the care of their children, elderly parents, and homes to women from the Third World. This is the female underside of globalization, whereby millions of [women] from poor countries in the south migrate to do the "women's work" of the north—work that affluent women are no longer able or willing to do. (2-3)

The flow of labor from the third world to the first world is only part of the story, of course. Women also migrate internally—in their own countries—to work in sweatshop conditions in



export-processing zones (EPZs), something which Nahid Aslanbeigui and Gale Summerfield discuss in their essay “Globalization, Labor Markets and Gender: Human Security Challenges from Cross-Border Sourcing in Services.” Aslanbeigui and Summerfield discuss the exporting of jobs to third-world countries, pointing to the fact that foreign direct investment has created more than 42 million jobs in export-processing zones globally, at least as of 2004. They write: “many workers in less developed countries (LDCs), especially women, have migrated for jobs that may pay a premium over the national wage rates. The same jobs, however, have been criticized for long hours, involuntary overtime, underpayment of wages, and unsafe working environments” (89).

In other words, late capitalism depends on the cheapest, most exploitable third-world labor. So labor is expendable, especially when it becomes too expensive or demanding. Thus, great numbers of women laborers from third-world countries are transported to other third-world countries when it suits capitalist needs. This is the so-called flexibility of capitalism, particularly for transnational corporations: if a group of women in a given third-world country attempt to form a union to demand fair wages and working conditions, they are easily fired and replaced by poorer women from their own country or other parts of the third world. And the ruling classes in third-world countries—aligned as they are with the first-world ruling class—continue to exploit poor women. Cynthia Enloe points to this phenomenon in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*:

The experiences of domestic workers discussed at Nairobi [the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women conference] served to underscore how simplistic the First World/Third World split is, and how inadequate it is to make sense of today’s international politics. Literally hundreds of thousands of women from Third World countries are cleaning the homes and minding the children of *other*, more affluent Third World women. (193)

Yet there is a definite distinction to be made between the third-world “national ruling classes” and the first-world capitalists. Because of the uneven development of global capitalism, they are not equally and similarly implicated in the global network of exploitation. The third-world national ruling classes exist as the governing classes, partly because they orchestrate their class-ties with their first-world counterparts, while also under extreme circumstances they tend to mortgage their countries to the advanced zones of capital, thus attesting to Samir Amin’s by-now well-known thesis of “unequal exchanges” between the first world and the third world nation-states under imperialism.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how the women’s movement in Bangladesh has taken up the cause of *hijras*, see Shireen Huq’s essay “Sex Workers’ Struggles in Bangladesh: Learning for the Women’s Movement.”

<sup>10</sup> This poem “Tell Us Marx” (220) by Mallika Sengupta—as well as several other of her poems—can be found in the collection *Signposts: Bengali Poetry Since Independence*, edited by Prabal Kumar Basu. Sengupta is currently the head of the sociology department in Maharani

Kasiswari College in Kolkata, and is the author of over 20 books, including fourteen volumes of poetry and two novels. Her poems can also be found in the collection *The Unsevered Tongue: Translated Poetry by Bengali Women*, edited by Amitabha Mukherjee.

<sup>11</sup> The idea of cultural critique comes from none other than Antonio Gramsci himself. So what is cultural critique? It is a kind of critique that demystifies and interrogates the cultural hegemonic structures and ideas—including a variety of cultural practices. The point of cultural critique is to maintain an activist edge to analysis without falling into the trap of “culturalism” which, like economic determinism, is “reductionist,” for the former reduces everything to culture while even fetishizing it. Gramsci talks about both economism and ideologism, and by stretching the notion of ideologism, I arrive at the notion of culturalism, while I posit cultural critique as an engaged anti-culturalist undertaking. For a discussion of economism and ideologism, see Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader*, chapter six (particularly section eleven of the chapter, entitled “Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of ‘Economism’”).

<sup>12</sup> Hegemony is one of those terms that has been excessively used (and misused) in recent critical works to mean a number of things. Although metropolitan academics have often read the Italian theorist-activist Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” as monolithically cultural, Gramsci himself explains that hegemony is ideological domination by *both* cultural consent *and* political coercion. See, for example, the section on Gramsci entitled “Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State,” pages 210-16 in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, edited by John Storey. I use the term “hegemony” in the sense that Gramsci uses it. But, as Gramsci also argues, hegemony is never complete. It always has cracks and fissures which can even lead to “the crisis of hegemony”—something which occurs for one of two reasons: “either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses (war, for example), or because huge masses (especially of peasants and petit-bourgeois intellectuals) have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to [. . .] a revolution” (*Gramsci Reader* 218). While Gramsci was speaking specifically of Italy during the Mussolini regime, his work is still relevant when we attempt to account for bourgeois ideology in the twenty-first century, in the U.S. and in Bangladesh. His work is also relevant in that he recognizes the spaces for and possibilities of confronting and overthrowing systems of inequality such as capitalism, imperialism, and racism.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussions of the rhetoric of economics from feminist perspectives, see *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics*, edited by Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson. This collection includes an essay by McCloskey, entitled “Some Consequences of a Conjective Economics” (69-93). Also particularly relevant is Diana Strassmann’s essay in this collection, “Not a Free Market: The Rhetoric of Disciplinary Authority in Economics” (54-68).

<sup>14</sup> The economist Deirdre McCloskey—formerly Donald McCloskey (she came out as transgendered in 1995, an event which, in itself, shook up notions of gender within the conservative field of economics)—has written several other books on the rhetoric of economics. See, for instance, (Donald) McCloskey’s book *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics* (1994) and edited collection *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric* (1988), which she (again, as Donald) co-edited with Arjo Klamer and Robert Solow.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of political economy within the field of composition, for instance, see Tony Scott’s *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition* and Bruce Horner’s *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### AGAINST SILENCING THE SITES AND SUBJECTS OF SILENCES:

#### THE CASE OF BANGLADESH

<sup>1</sup> See Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. Also, mark this passage from his letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, entitled “Making History,” in which Howard Zinn indicates the dimension and direction of his own historiography thus:

My history, therefore, describes the inspiring struggle of those who have fought slavery and racism (Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses), of the labor organizers who have led strikes for the rights of working people (Big Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, César Chávez), of the socialists and others who have protested war and militarism (Eugene Debs, Helen Keller, the Rev. Daniel Berrigan, Cindy Sheehan). My hero is not Theodore Roosevelt who loved war and congratulated a general after a massacre of Filipino villagers at the turn of the century, but Mark Twain, who denounced the massacre and satirized imperialism. (par. 3)

<sup>2</sup> These lyrics come from Ani DiFranco’s song entitled “My IQ,” from her album *Puddle Dive* (1994).

<sup>3</sup> These lines come from Ani DiFranco’s song, “My IQ” from her album *Puddle Dive*.

<sup>4</sup> When it comes to the notion of development/underdevelopment in the context of Bangladesh, I must note the critical legacy of works such as Walter Rodney’s *How Europe*

*Underdeveloped Africa* and Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. These texts have informed and shaped my own understanding of the unequal power-relations and production-relations which are the products of global capitalism and imperialism.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussions of the systematic rape of Bengali women perpetrated by the Pakistani army, see Susan Brownmiller's *Against our will: Men, women, and rape* (1975), Amita Malik's *The Year of the Vulture* (1972), Nayanika Mookherjee's "Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh," and Claudia Card's "Rape as a Weapon of War."

<sup>6</sup> Gangopadhyay's poem "Nineteen Seventy One" is included in Prabal Kumar Basu's edited collection, *Signposts: Bengali Poetry Since Independence* (59-60).

<sup>7</sup> *Hartals* have been used in South Asia since the British colonial rule as a means of resistance to the powers that be. Gandhi himself resorted to this means of resistance. Today, the constitution of Bangladesh recognizes *hartals* as a valid form of political resistance under democracy, although the constitution, under many circumstances, has been violated, and there are numerous cases in which this means of resistance has been brutally suppressed, both by the military and ostensibly democratic governments.

<sup>8</sup> The highly selective nature and even class-character of the so-called "campaign on corruption" launched by the military-backed interim government has been discussed in a variety of contexts by a number of oppositional Bengali intellectuals such as Badruddin Umar, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Anu Muhammad, and most notably, Nurul Kabir, the editor of *New Age*, the country's most radical and progressive English-language newspaper, which can be found online at <<http://www.newagebd.com/>>. In fact, during the emergency period, the *New Age* came out with numerous editorials and articles that questioned the not only the campaign on corruption, but the very validity and legitimacy of the military-backed interim government in Bangladesh. Kabir also criticized the interim government on popular talk shows on television, and thus he himself became the target of the military for some time.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. As Lenin puts it, "If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism" (88). In other words, one cannot meaningfully and adequately talk about imperialism without talking about capitalism itself.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**

**THE INTEGRATION OF BANGLADESH INTO THE GLOBAL CAPITALIST  
SYSTEM; OR, HOW CAPITALISM AND U.S. IMPERIALISM  
HAVE UNDERDEVELOPED BANGLADESH**

<sup>1</sup> These by-now famous lines were penned (in Bengali) by the communist activist poet Sukanta Bhattacharya, who was referred to as the “Young Nazrul” and who died of tuberculosis at the young age of twenty.

<sup>2</sup> For the World Bank’s own discussion of its agriculture and water development plan, see its publication, *Bangladesh Agriculture and Water Development: The Hard Core Program* (1973).

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Spivak provides a theoretically-engaged critical account of the Flood Action Plan in chapter two of *Other Asias*, entitled “Responsibility – 1992: Testing Theory in the Plains” (an update to a previous article, “Responsibility.”). Also, Shapan Adnan is critical of the World Bank’s Flood Action Plan. See, for instance, his book *Floods, People and the Environment* and his essay, “Intellectual critiques, people’s resistance and inter-reparian contestations: Constraints to the power of the state regarding flood control and water management in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta of Bangladesh,” in the collection *Water, Sovereignty and Borders in Asia and Oceania*, edited by Devleena Ghosh, et al. (104-124).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the closure of the Adamjee Jute Mills, see Anu Muhammad’s *Development or Destruction?*, particularly the chapter entitled “Closure of Adamjee Jute Mills: Victory of Anti-Industrial Development (AID) Projects?” (149-156).

<sup>5</sup> This interview was conducted on Bangladesh’s major national-level television channel, NTV, in 2008. While the interview was in Bangla, this translation is provided by Azfar Hussain.

<sup>6</sup> See USAID’s document entitled “Digital Geologic and Geophysical Data of Bangladesh” (2001). Maps of the oil resources in Bangladesh compiled by USAID, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Energy, are available online at <<http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1997/ofr-97-470/OF97-470H/>> (see Persits, et al.).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Serajul Islam Choudhury's *Nirbachita Prabandha* [Selected Essays], Anu Muhammad's *Development or Destruction?* and Nurul Kabir's numerous editorials that have appeared in the newspaper, *The New Age*.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the nature, character, and the formation of the national bourgeoisie of Bangladesh see, for instance, Badruddin Umar's "Bangladeshe Jatiyo Bourgeoisie-ra Kibhabe Obosthan Kore? [How are the national bourgeoisie located in Bangladesh?]" in his collection, *Nirbachita Prabandha* (Selected Essays) (46-47) and his book, *General Crisis of the Bourgeoisie in Bangladesh*.

<sup>9</sup> In *On the Margins: Refugees, Migrants and Minorities* (edited by Chowdhury R. Abrar), the contributors discuss the circumstances of Rohingya refugees from Burma, and the working conditions for female migrant workers and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, the displacement of minority groups such as Hindus, Maghs and Biharis in Bangladesh, and the trafficking of women and children in Bangladesh.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **THE MARGINS OF THE MARGINAL: THE GENDERED SUBALTERN**

#### **IN BANGLADESH**

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which the Muslim fundamentalist political party Jama'at-i Islami has consistently attacked the rights of women in Bangladesh, see Elora Shehabuddin's essay "Beware the Bed of Fire: Gender, Democracy, and the Jama'at-i Islami in Bangladesh."

<sup>2</sup> For a general picture of the deterioration of the status of women in Bangladesh, see Naila Kabeer's *Reversed Realities*. Also see *Women, Bangladesh and International Security*, edited by Imtiaz Ahmed, which deals with women's unequal access to law, reproductive health, women in the rural areas, gender discrimination in the labor market, and images of women in the mass media. Furthermore, *Gender Equality in Bangladesh: Still a Long Way to Go*, edited by Shahiduzzaman and Mahfuzur Rahman deals with the questions of women's rights being subjugated, indigenous and poor women's oppression, lack of legal access, the trafficking of women and children, violence perpetrated on women (domestically, nationally, and internationally).

<sup>3</sup> See the Government of Bangladesh's "Status Report Submitted to the United Nations on progress in Implementation of CEDAW" (2003).

<sup>4</sup> A.K.M. Atiqur Rahman discusses the National Policy for the Advancement of Women at great length in "Gender Disaggregation of Public Expenditure: General Administration," an essay from the collection *Who Gets What: A Gender Analysis of Public Expenditure in Bangladesh*. See pages 259-263, in particular.

<sup>5</sup> This poem is translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta, and appears in Mallika Sengupta's essay, "Khanaa's Daughters: Voices of the Margilized Female in Bengali Postcolonial Women's Poetry."

<sup>6</sup> Ahsan and Hossain make this argument in their essay "Woman and Child Trafficking in Bangladesh: A Social Disaster in the Backdrop of Natural Calamities," which appears in the collection *Disaster and the Silent Gender: Contemporary Studies in Geography* (147-170), edited by Rosie Ahsan and Hafiza Khatun. This collection includes a number of articles relating to how gender is implicated in "natural" disasters such as storms, floods, earthquakes, river bank erosion, cyclones, environmental degradation, and also including "social disasters" such as human trafficking and maternal mortality.

<sup>7</sup> For the statistics on acid attacks provided by the Acid Survivors Foundation, see their website: <<http://www.acidsurvivors.org/statistics.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the news reports relating to this incident, see "Bangladeshi Girl Sentenced to 101 Lashes" by VOA News.

<sup>9</sup> The Jama'at-i-Islami party has formed strategic coalitions with both of the major political parties in Bangladesh, the BNP and the Awami League. In fact, in the most recent elections, the Awami League's alliance with Jama'at-i-Islami was hotly contested by the left contingency in Bangladesh as a reactionary move towards the right for the sole purpose of garnering more votes. For further discussion of the political and social role played by Jama'at-i-Islami in Bangladesh, see Sufia Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh* (particularly pages 163-174 of chapter five, "The Contested Place of Nation in *Umma* and Globalizing Efforts"); Elora Shehabuddin's essays "Contesting the Illicit: Gender and the Politics of Fatwas in Bangladesh" and "Beware the Bed of Fire: Gender, Democracy, and the Jama'at-i-Islami in Bangladesh"; Hiranmay Karlekar's book *Bangladesh: The New Afghanistan?*; Sreeradha Datta's essay "Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh: The Threat from Within"; and Taj Hashmi's essay "Islamic Resurgence in Bangladesh: Genesis, Dynamics and Implications" in the collection *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia* (edited by Sutu P. Limaye, Mohan Malik & Robert Wirsing).

<sup>10</sup> This poem is translated by Setapa Neogi, and appears in Mallika Sengupta's essay, "Khanaa's Daughters: Voices of the Margilized Female in Bengali Postcolonial Women's Poetry."

<sup>11</sup> This poem is translated by Malabika Sarkar, and appears in Mallika Sengupta's essay, "Khanaa's Daughters: Voices of the Margilized Female in Bengali Postcolonial Women's Poetry."

<sup>12</sup> For a news report of the incident in which a garment worker was killed by security guards and the production manager of a garment factory for allegedly stealing a t-shirt, see the article "Mirpur garment worker lynched for a T-shirt," which appeared in *The Daily Star* on December 31, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the struggles of *hijras* in Bangladesh for rights and protection under the law, see Shireen Huq's "Sex Workers' Struggles in Bangladesh: Learning for the Women's Movement." Huq relates the ways in which the feminist organization Naripokkho became involved in this struggle, and the ways in which *hijras* who became involved in Naripokkho challenged the group members' fixed ideas of gender and sexuality:

One of the groups that came forward during this campaign [to protect the rights of sex workers] was a group of *hijras* (inter-sex persons), whose main livelihood is usually sex work. This committed us [Naripokkho] to a new relationship and added a whole other dimension to our sexual rights campaign. It challenged our own adoption of the standard sex/gender concepts as fixed categories, and forced us to redefine our notion of what makes a woman. The application for membership by inter-sex groups into the national network of women's organizations started for us a process of revisiting the biology vs. social construction framework that had thus far informed our thinking on gender and social change. (136)

<sup>14</sup> Taslima Nasreen's poem "You Go Girl!" can be found in various translations, with even varying titles. This version of the poem is translated by Carolyn Wright and can be found on Nasreen's own poetry website: <[http://taslimanasrin.com/tn\\_poetry\\_by.html](http://taslimanasrin.com/tn_poetry_by.html)>.



**CHAPTER SEVEN:**  
**DEVELOPMENT RHETORIC IN BANGLADESH:**  
**A FEMINIST CRITIQUE**

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the concept of neocolonialism, and Kwame Nkrumah's coinage of the term "neo-colonialism," see Robert Young's *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 44-56.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the dependency theorists and of postcolonial thought in development economics, from the perspectives of Bangladesh, see Nasreen Khundker's essay "Post-Colonial Thought in Development Economics: A Review of the Main Trends."

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Nkrumah articulates his critique of the term "Third World" in his 1968 essay, *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare: A Guide to the Armed Phase of the African Revolution*.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, edited by Kriemild Saunders, a number of scholars come together, making various arguments vis-à-vis development discourse, but all fundamentally challenging development paradigms as profoundly insufficient for creating sustained global change that serves rather than oppresses and exploits poor women in the third world.

<sup>5</sup> For studies of how discourse is applied to the context of the postcolonial world, see, for instance, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," and Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism."

<sup>6</sup> This poem is translated by Setapa Neogi, and appears in Mallika Sengupta's essay, "Khanaa's Daughters: Voices of the Marginalized Female in Bengali Postcolonial Women's Poetry."

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of USAID's focus on women in Bangladesh, see E. Boyd Wennergren and Morris D. Whitaker's working paper entitled "An Overview of Women's Roles and USAID Programs in Bangladesh" (1986) and *A Women in Development Implementation Plan for USAID/Bangladesh*, prepared by Marguerite Berger and Martin Greeley (1987).

<sup>8</sup> See chapter twelve—"Bangladesh—Survival of the Richest"—in Hartman's book *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* (221-241). As the title of the chapter suggests, Hartman is

critical of the family planning practices in Bangladesh, arguing in essence that such practices end up benefiting the rich, while poor women suffer.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, at a science museum that I visited in a neighboring country in the spring of 2010, there was a huge display on birth control that advertised Norplant as the “most effective” form of birth control, even more effective than vasectomy (the display had not been updated since 1996). So, while thousands of women have since died or gone blind or suffered other serious side effects from the use of Norplant, thousands of children and teenagers who come through the halls of this museum every year continue to learn that Norplant is actually the most effective form of birth control available. Such an erroneous message is not only inexcusable but completely irresponsible. I e-mailed the museum, informing them of the serious misinformation on their display, and they did respond, saying that they were aware of the fact that Norplant is no longer considered “a viable option for contraception” (but yet, the display remained intact for 14 years). However, they did indicate that they would update the display soon.

<sup>10</sup> Farida Akhter shared these observations with me in a personal interview conducted over e-mail exchange (27 Feb. 2010).

<sup>11</sup> The terms “One-Third World” and “Two-Third World” were originally coined by Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash in *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (1998). The terms represent a certain understanding of what Esteva and Prakash call “social minorities” and “social majorities.” In her essay “One-Third/Two-Thirds World,” Chandra Mohanty argues: “[t]he advantage of one-third/two-thirds world in relation to terms like “Western/Third World” and “North/South” is that they move away from misleading geographical and ideological binarisms” (42).

<sup>12</sup> This statement appears in the comment section in response to the article posted on WITN.com, entitled “Teacher Suspended After Facebook Post” (Feb. 16, 2010).

## CHAPTER EIGHT:

### UNSEVERED TONGUES: WOMEN'S LITERARY, CULTURAL AND ACTIVIST PRODUCTIONS IN BANGLADESH

<sup>1</sup> This poem by Mallika Sengupta, a Bengali feminist poet from Kolkata, West Bengal, appears in her own critical essay, "Khanaa's Daughters: Voices of the Marginalized Female in Bengali Postcolonial Women's Poetry." Khanaa was an actual historical figure in medieval Bengal who, in fact, was famous for making very profound but down-to-earth statements about life, nature, the economy, and so on. She was an oral philosopher, in other words, and famous for *bachans* (pithy sayings) in mostly-rhymed verse. Because of her challenge to the patriarchal establishment, her tongue was split. A number of feminist literary productions in Bangladesh and West Bengal in India have drawn on her work, such as *The Unsevered Tongue: Translated Poetry by Bengali Women*, edited and translated by Amitabha Mukherjee. Also, there is a Bengali play called *Khanaa* by Samina Luthfa Nitra (a Marxist feminist sociologist), which has been published and performed in Bangladesh this year. The play foregrounds and politicizes, among other things, the figure of Khanaa and her various proverbial enunciations from explicitly feminist political perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> This poem is included in Taslima's anthology of poetry, *All About Love* (17), and was translated from the original Bengali by the poet herself.

<sup>3</sup> More *fatwas* were issued against Taslima in subsequent years. While she was living in India, in 2007, Muslim clerics in India issued a *fatwa* against her, offering 500,000 rupees to anyone who would decapitate her. At a book launch, she was attacked, and chairs were thrown, and she was slapped in the face. There were also mass demonstrations held in which effigies of her were burned. She was ordered to leave India, but she resisted this at first, asking "What is my crime? My crime is that I have found that Islam does not consider woman a separate human being" (qtd. in Lichter 89). But in 2008 she did relocate to Paris, where she lives now.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed reading of *Lajja*, see C. N. Srinath's essay "Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*: An Insider's Account: A Feminine View." Srinath uses the term "feminine," which seems to be interchangeable with "feminism" in the context of the article. Srinath writes: "It is to the credit of Taslima [...] that the novel explores the concentric circles of shame to present a tragic human predicament not only of a family but of a whole community of people who are forced to live an alien life in their own homeland" (54). Srinath further writes that Taslima has tapped into a "liberalizing potential of art in a novel, whose strength is not unfortunately literary excellence

but has other compelling compensatory qualities to serve as a humanizing agent in a context that makes it very relevant” (54).

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the *fatwa* placed on Taslima Nasreen by the “Council of Soldiers of Islam” and of the gender dynamics surrounding it, see Dina Siddiqi’s essay “Taslima Nasreen and Others: The Contest over Gender in Bangladesh” (209-227), in the anthology *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, edited by Herbert Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi.

<sup>6</sup> This extensive “special registration” process—which was quite clearly racial profiling—was enacted by the Department of Homeland Security in order to determine whether or not (male) visitors from Bangladesh posed a security threat. The gendered nature of the special registration was also indicative of Western patriarchal notions of women coming from a third-world country like Bangladesh. The assumption is that they have no agency. Women from Bangladesh were not considered a threat by the U.S. government; apparently they were not capable of committing acts of terrorism. My own husband, who was working on his Ph.D at the time—and who had been granted a Fulbright fellowship to complete his Master’s degree in the US—was subject to the humiliating and frightening process of Homeland Security’s special registration. I recall very vividly the moment that he was whisked away into the back rooms of the Homeland Security office by a large man bearing a large gun. Knowing that there were cases in which people showed up for these interviews, and then just disappeared, held in custody without a trial or any due process of law, the entire process was a form of psychological torture for us.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Samir Amin’s essay “The Political Economy of the Twentieth Century” and Tariq Ali’s *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*.

<sup>8</sup> As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Taslima Nasreen’s poem “You Go Girl!” can be found in various translations, with even varying titles. This version of the poem is translated by Carolyn Wright and can be found on Nasreen’s own poetry website: [http://taslimanasrin.com/tn\\_poetry\\_by.html](http://taslimanasrin.com/tn_poetry_by.html).

<sup>9</sup> Spivak makes these comments in the foreword to her translation of Mahasweta Devi’s story “Draupadi,” arguing that if we take up literary works such as that of the Bengali fiction writer Mahasweta Devi (from West Bengal in India), we might be inclined to move away from the “information retrieval” mode. Devi writes primarily of tribal groups in India, and particularly of women’s issues and struggles within such groups.

<sup>10</sup> Audre Lorde deploys the term “racist feminism” in her by-now famous speech, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” which is included in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*.

<sup>11</sup> Rokeya, as she is referred to in Bangladesh, is most famously known for her utopian fictional story, “Sultana’s Dream.” This story is included in the collection *Sultana’s Dream and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, edited and translated by Roushan Jahan. “Sultana’s Dream” follows a kind of an Alice in Wonderland motif—the narrator, Sultana, falls asleep and goes to another land. But the land is different here in the sense that women run everything and men are stuck at home in the kitchen, cooking and performing all the household duties. The men are in purdah, in other words—they don’t go out much and aren’t exposed to women except family. So in Sultana’s dream the gender roles are reversed. This is accomplished not by force but by intelligence—the women come up with creative ways of getting and storing water, and using sunlight for energy rather than cooking on a stove. The sunlight was used to ward off an attacking army, and since the women had saved the land, they remained in charge. This story, which has been interpreted and reread by numerous Bengali feminists, remains a major work in the history of Bengali feminist literary productions. The story is interesting not only for how the roles are reversed, but also because of the way the narrator imagines a different society—there is no use of violence and there is an emphasis on harmony with nature.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of all such Muslim feminists in late colonial Bengal, see Mahua Sarkar’s *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women*, particularly chapter three, entitled “Negotiating Modernity: The Social Production of Muslim-ness in Late Colonial Bengal” (78-132).

<sup>13</sup> *Biplobi Nari Songhoti*’s Marxist-feminist theoretical positions have been variously articulated in their annual journal *Muktoshwar*.

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of *Naripokkho*, also see Shireen Huq’s articles “Rights and the Women’s Movement” and “Sex Workers’ Struggles in Bangladesh: Learning for the Women’s Movement.” Also see Firdous Azim’s essays “Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh,” “Women’s Movements in Bangladesh,” “Negotiating New Terrains: South Asian Feminisms,” and “Women and freedom.”

<sup>15</sup> Like Taslima Nasreen and many other Bengali writers, Selina Hossain is referred to by her first name in Bangladesh. I thus follow this tradition.

<sup>16</sup> I would argue that there are many similarities to be drawn between Selina Hossain and Mahasweta Devi, given that both of their novels and stories focus on the lives and perspectives of poor women, yet resist native-informant modes of representation. While the West has come to know of Mahasweta Devi through the translations of Gayatri Spivak, Selina Hossain’s work

remains relatively unknown in the West. For discussion of Devi's work, see Gayatri Spivak's introduction to Devi's *Imaginary Maps* as well as Waseem Anwar's essay "Transcribing Resistance: Cartographies of Struggling Bodies and Minds in Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*."

<sup>17</sup> While I do not address her work comprehensively here, one of such stories translated into English is "Izzat," in the collection *Different Perspectives: Women Writing in Bangladesh* (edited by Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman).

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Azfar Hussain for not only putting me in contact with Selina Hossain, but also for his role as a mediator and translator—he translated on the spot for us as we conversed, while he also translated her written responses to my questions from Bangla to English.

<sup>19</sup> For the full text of my interview with Selina Hossain, see Appendix A.

<sup>20</sup> For another, more recent novel set during Bangladesh's war of liberation, see Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007). *A Golden Age* is Anam's first novel. Given the fact that Tahmima Anam's book was published by HarperCollins—while Selina Hossain's book was published in Bangladesh—compared to Selina's novel, *A Golden Age* has been more widely read in the West.

<sup>21</sup> Prasad argues that Ahmad's critique of Jameson goes too far, in the sense that Ahmad tries to wipe out all connections between third-world countries. Prasad writes, for instance, that "the interdependency of nation-states and their inscription in a single world order, whatever the regional and cultural differences, are lost sight of in the anxiety to preserve inviolate an interiority that the nation-state claims for itself and that Ahmad grants to it uncritically" (146). Rather, Prasad argues that it is necessary to see "the relatedness of apparently distinct and autonomous zones of the social" (145).

## CHAPTER NINE:

### CAPITAL'S CLAWS IN GAS, COAL AND OIL: THE CORPORATE COLONIZATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND MASS-LINE ERUPTIONS IN PHULBARI

<sup>1</sup> Lyle is quoted in Kristan Deconinck's article "Bangladesh coal divides region," appearing in the *BBC World Service* (12 July 2006).

<sup>2</sup> These lines are taken from Anu Muhammad's interview "Mineral Resources is the Blood Flown in Our Vein," conducted by Audity Falguni.

<sup>3</sup> This 75 year-old man is also quoted in Deconinck's article.

<sup>4</sup> It would not be out of place to point out here that a number of Bengali feminist theorists have taken issue with such male-dominated nationalist historical narratives. Some of these theorists go to the extent of arguing that the entire project of nationalism itself is male-dominated—even androcentric. For instance, Bishnupriya Ghosh observes in her essay "An Affair to Remember: Scripted Performances in the 'Nasreen Affair'" that "[i]n anticolonial movements in most parts of the world, (male) nationalist forces often used women as signifiers of surviving/indigenous cultural authenticities" (54). Drawing from the works of Deniz Kandiyoti, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Floya Anthias, Ghosh maintains that "postcolonial national prestige often combines Western (modern) notions of national sovereignty with antimodernist emphasis on traditional values: the dignity and reclusivity of Muslim women are juxtaposed to the demonization and sexual commodification of their Other, the Western woman" (54).

<sup>5</sup> Bangladeshi intellectuals such as Farida Akhter, Badruddin Umar, Serajul Islam Choudhury, and Anu Muhammad have documented such movements in their works. See, for instance, Badruddin Umar's *Nirbachita Prabandha* and his *General Crisis of the Bourgeoisie in Bangladesh*. In the past, many of the national-level newspapers were either not inclined or not allowed to cover such movements, protests, strikes, rallies, demonstrations, and so on from the perspectives of the actual participating people, while occasionally some of such movements were given coverage, only to reinforce the hegemonic perspective of the national ruling-class. However, it is only recently that the national daily English-language newspaper *The New Age* has courageously played the role of covering people's movements and protests with a consistently oppositional stance, while thus continuously advocating the cause of the subaltern.

<sup>6</sup> For some of the details of Asia Energy’s proposed project, see Justin Huggler’s article in *The Independent*, “Bangladesh hit by violent protests over British firm’s coal mine plan” (August 31, 2006).

<sup>7</sup>The website Mines and Communities—a website that is devoted to exposing “the social, economic, and environmental impacts of mining, particularly as they affect Indigenous and land-based peoples” (MAC, “About Mines and Communities” par. 1)—has paid special attention to the case of the Phulbari movement in Bangladesh, and continues to post updates related to Global Coal Management’s ongoing proposals for open-coal mining in the Phulbari region. See their focus-page on Bangladesh at the following site: <<http://www.minesandcommunities.org/list.php?r=875>>. Another website devoted exclusively to the “Phulbari Resistance” can be found at <<http://phulbariresistance.blogspot.com/>>. This site provides a wealth of articles and ongoing information regarding the Phulbari Movement.

<sup>8</sup> This estimate provided by Asia Energy Corporation of the projected number of people to be displaced by their coal project was made public in the article “Cancellation of Phulbari Coal Project demanded,” which appeared in *The Daily Star* on August 24, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the disputes about the number of project-affected people in the Phulbari region, see the article “Rehabilitation issue makes it a tough task,” which was published in *The Daily Star* on August 29, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Nasrin Siraj, who has shared with me with certain factual details about the emergence and development of the Phulbari movement. She herself has taken part in the Phulbari movement as both a journalist and activist. I have drawn upon her unpublished essay, “The Phulbari Uprising.” I have also had numerous conversations with one of the key participants of the movement—Anu Muhammad—who is the member-secretary of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports as well as a leading political economist and public intellectual. Furthermore, I have had conversations with a number of young Bangladeshi activists who have also been associated with the movement in a variety of ways—Taslima Akhter, Zonayed Saki, Faruk Wasif, Boby Farzana, Abul Hasan Rubel, and Firoze Ahmad, among others.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the discovery and exploration of the coal reserves in Bangladesh, see the article published on the Mines & Communities website, “Asia Energy To List Its Major Coal And Power Station Project In Bangladesh On AIM Minesite” (March 22, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Although Mahmudur Rahman said this initially, he still ended up serving the purpose of both the government and Asia Energy Corporation. In fact, a number of the Phulbari



Movement protesters directly expressed their grievances with Mahmudur Rahman. They, in fact, displayed signs demanding his resignation from the government.

<sup>13</sup> See, again, the article published on the Mines & Communities website, “Asia Energy To List Its Major Coal And Power Station Project In Bangladesh On AIM Minesite” (March 22, 2004). The article indicates that the kind of project that Asia Energy intended to undertake in Bangladesh would be not only expensive, but take years to accomplish, with full production not reached until 2017. Such a long and expensive project, the article cautions, would require the goodwill of the Bangladeshi government. The incentives offered by the government appeared—at least to the writers of this article—to be proof enough that Asia Energy was in the good graces of Bangladesh. (At this point, of course, the Phulbari Movement had not yet emerged.)

<sup>14</sup> The National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (NCPOGMPP) was first established in 1998, in resistance to the government’s contract with various international oil and gas companies. Anu Muhammad recounts the initial movements enacted by the NCPOGMPP in an interview conducted in September, 2009 by Audity Falguny, “Mineral Resources is the Blood Flown in Our Vein: Interview with Anu Muhammad.” Muhammad describes the initial struggles and achievements of the NCPOGMPP thus:

In 1998, when the Awami League (AL) government was in power, the government was initiating to sign and conclude two agreements with the IOCs [International Oil Companies]. The first agreement related to leasing of the Chittagong port to a U.S. Company for 199 years. We then organized a long march from Dhaka to Chittagong port and it is largely thanks to our movement that government could not avoid probing in detail into the company and then some major loopholes came out. [...] The then Sheikh Hasina government yielded to our movement and the lease agreement, which was on the verge of being finalized, got cancelled. Second, two IOCs [International Oil Companies]...the U.K.-based oil & gas exploration company Shell and the U.S.-based company UNOCOL drafted the design of the installation of a pipe-line from one of our pertinent gas fields, Bibyana, Sylhet, to Delhi and the designing and lay-out were disbursed on web-site. But, the government was yet to finalize the proposal for gas export. A section of 'hired' consultants, bureaucrats, businessmen, media, U.S. Embassy, Indian High Commission, World Bank and ADB began stipulating that Bangladesh was "floating on gas" and it was the "best time to export gas." [...] NCPOGMPP then had to wage war at two levels. First, we had to theoretically challenge this propaganda by making people aware of the exact situation of the real gas reserve scenario of Bangladesh, dynamics of internal use and demand, etc. [...] NCPOGMPP mobilized people for another long march towards Dhaka-Bibyana, Sylhet. Thus, the Awami League

government could not sign the agreements with Shell and UNOCOL. The BNP succeeded the AL government in 2001 and they also began playing on the same tune, reciting that there is no worth of keeping gas under earth. [...] But we were firm in our movement and people stood on behalf of us. So, the BNP government also failed like its predecessor. (par. 2)

<sup>15</sup> See the report “Energy kills: Phulbari coal mine project of Bangladesh,” published in *AITPN: Asian Indigenous and Tribal People’s Network: Indigenous Rights Quarterly* (2006).

<sup>16</sup> See Bishawjit Das’s article, “Magistrate forced to give firing order” which appeared in *The Daily Star* on August 30, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See Aminul Islam, “Govt mum over scrapping Asia Energy deal,” published in *The New Age* on September 1, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> These seven points are explained in “Phulbari Day and the Coal Policy,” an article written by Anu Muhammad and SM Shaheedullah, appearing in *The New Age* on August 26, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> See the article “Phulbari Movement Day Today: No step yet to cancel deal with Asia Energy,” appearing in *The New Age* on August 26, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> This statement by Anu Muhammad appeared in the article “Oil gas committee wants govt to implement Phulbari deal,” published in *The New Age* on August 18, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> For further information regarding Nostromo Research, see the article “Nostromo: A unique community consultancy on mining – a Partizans project,” which appeared on the *Mines and Communities* website (July 12, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of the Bank Information Center, see “About the Bank Information Center,” a description available on their own website: <<http://www.bicusa.org/en/Page.About.aspx>>.

<sup>23</sup> For an interview that was taken with Anu Muhammad eight days after he was brutally beaten, see “Mineral Resources is the Blood Flown in Our Vein” (11 Sept. 2009), conducted by Audity Falguni.

<sup>24</sup> This image appeared on the front page of *The New Age*, alongside the article “Protest Against Offshore Block Deal: 50 injured as police charge into demo” (Sept. 2, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> This information is garnered through personal communication with Anu Muhammad, while all of the major newspapers in Bangladesh at the time were also covering the story.

<sup>26</sup> Both maps can be found on the U.S. government's own online publication archive, entitled "Digital Geologic and Geophysical Data of Bangladesh" and are available at this website: <<http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1997/ofr-97-470/OF97-470H/>>.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the Magurchhara blowout and Occidental's contract with the Bangladesh government, see "Khaleda's role in Niko, Asia Energy deals under probe," an article that appeared in *The Daily Star* on August 16, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of USAID's Nishorgo Project and its connection to Chevron's operations in Bangladesh, see Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan's essay "Chevron's Seismic Survey, USAID's Nishorgo Project, the Lawachara National Park of Bangladesh: A Critical Review."

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of the proposed production sharing contract with ConocoPhillips for gas blocks in the Bay of Bengal, see Meer Ahsan Habib's essay, "Gas Bubble: The Saga Repeated in Bangladesh."

<sup>30</sup> See the Asian Development Bank's own news release, "ADB Loan to Help Bangladesh Boost Natural Gas Supply" (March 26, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of how the Phulbari coal mine project in Bangladesh fits into the larger scenario of extractive industries that violate human rights and freedoms, see the article "Energy kills: Phulbari coal mine project of Bangladesh" which appeared in *Indigenous Rights Quarterly* (2006), an online journal produced by the Asian Indigenous and Tribal People's Network.

<sup>32</sup> For the full report, see John Ruggie, "Interim Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the Issue of Human Rights and Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises." Unocal, for instance, was specifically mentioned in the report for one of the worst violations of human rights—it had been charged with allegedly working with the Myanmar military to "conscript forced labor, kill, abuse, and rape citizens while working on the Yadana gas pipeline project." This report was also cited in the article "Energy kills: Phulbari coal mine project of Bangladesh."

<sup>33</sup> See the article "Moriarty reiterates US support to power sector of Bangladesh" that appeared in *The Financial Express* (26 August 2009).

**CHAPTER TEN:**  
**(IN)CONCLUSION: REVISITING CRITICAL INTERNATIONALISM, FEMINIST**  
**POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND U.S. IMPERIALISM**

<sup>1</sup> This essay by Samir Amin appeared in *Monthly Review* (June 1996).

<sup>2</sup> This poem of mine appeared in the journal *In our own words: A Journal About Women*, published by Grand Valley State University's Women's Center (March 2010).

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## APPENDIX A

### AN INTERVIEW WITH SELINA HOSSAIN

Dhaka, Bangladesh, 12 Jan. 2008

Translator Azfar Hussain

#### **The Horizon of the Woman Question in Selina Hossain's Literary Productions**

*MLH [Melissa Hussain]: How do you deal with the woman question in your novels?*

**SH [Selina Hossain]:** In my writings, I seek to view and engage the woman question within a broad horizon. I don't view the woman question within the contexts of merely domestic violence or sexual relationships within a family. In 1974 I wrote a couple of novels— *Hangor Nodi Grenade* [*The Shark, The River and The Grenades*] and *Pado Shabdo* [*Sounds of Footfalls*].

#### *The Shark, The River and The Grenades*

**SH:** The background for the first novel is the liberation war of Bangladesh, while the protagonist of that novel is a woman. Since childhood, she has been a victim of familial inequities, as I call them. She hasn't even got a proper name from her own parents. She gets married to a widowed, old man who already has two sons. It is usually held in our Bengali culture that the relationship between a stepmother and a stepchild is not a happy one. But, in my novel, I have gone against the grain of this culture of exhibiting an unhappy relationship—I have made it rather happy.

My purpose here is to enact a sense of humanity against the hegemonic mode of stereotyping and typifying human relationships. Let me return to the protagonist of the novel: Buri, for quite some years, could not have a child. The rural prejudices, however, prompt her to go to the *fakirs* [religiously wise people and religious leaders] for help. Indeed, at one point, she gets pregnant and eventually gives birth to a mentally disabled child. When the child grows up a little, the war of liberation breaks out in the country. It is precisely here that the life of the protagonist, as portrayed in the novel, gets disrupted and takes a turn. The protagonist begins to nourish the dream of emancipation in her own self, thus extending the self beyond the self by way of politicizing it.

At one point, two freedom fighters seek shelter from her so as to save their lives from the brutal Pakistani soldiers who were out there to kill them. Of course, Buri gives them shelter, while saving them by offering her own son with a rifle to the Pakistani soldiers. The reason as to why she does it is that her own son is not a freedom-fighter yet, while she thought that the freedom-fighters were way more valuable than her own son.

Thus I have expanded and broadened and politicized the role of women. I have also shown how the so-called illiterate women can even exemplarily exercise their agency in terms of making the right decision at the right time. In terms of emancipation—in this instance, anticolonial liberation war—the female figure by no means remains passive, but rather active on more levels than men can afford to imagine. She not only acts in various ways, but she also offers the resources of imagination and intuition such that they all play very politically significant roles.

### *Sounds of Footfalls*

**SH:** In the next novel called *Sounds of Footfalls*, I have created two characters—the two protagonists. Their names are Salma and Nasima. Salma’s father is a university teacher. She protests the immoral activities of her own father. On the other hand, Nasima’s father is also a university teacher, but his lifestyle and outlook are radically different from those of Salma’s father. He thinks that his own profession, the teaching profession, is a noble one, and that he should exemplify it in his own life. Nasima lives together with her lover. She even thinks of having a child with him. Then she marries him, thinking that the child should not suffer from societal oppression by being “illegitimate.”

Thus I have seen the woman’s question from that perspective as well, nearly thirty-five years ago. And for thirty-five years now, my novels have been taking up women’s issues and concerns and questions in a variety of ways. I have written a novel called *Bhalobasha Pritilata* [Love, Pritilata]—an explicitly anti-British colonial novel. Another novel I have written is called *Kantatare Prajapati* [The Butterfly on the Barbed Wire]. The novel is about a peasant movement—about its female leader and activist Ila Mitra.<sup>2</sup> I have written yet another novel called *Alaukik Andhar* [Supernatural Darkness]. This is a protest novel that deals with domestic violence and oppression. I also examine the questions of agency and structure when a woman decides to sell her own body to stave off hunger in times of famine in my novel called *Gayatri Sadhya* [The Evening of Gayatri].

When a woman freedom-fighter, Juthika, returns from the battlefield and she suddenly finds an abandoned, so-called “illegitimate” baby girl in the street, she immediately takes the

baby in her arms and decides to take care of her, while wondering if, in this “liberated” country, there is still the shelter for such infants. She questions the entire range of practices in her own country: Why doesn’t this child have a mother? Why doesn’t this child have a father? Why has someone thrown her away in the street? These are the issues and concerns and questions that I have dealt with in my novel *Nijer Roshshite Gittu* [The Knot in Your Own Rope].

There is another novel called *Kat Kailar Chhobi* [The Images of Coals]—a novel about a female laborer who works in a coal mine, who is the mother of a war-child [product of the rape by Pakistani soldiers]. In the novel, the “bastard” war-son keeps seeking his own mother and arrives at the mine from a foreign land.

Thus I have dwelt on women’s issues and concerns in a variety of ways, although I haven’t provided all the examples here. To sum up, in my stories and novels, I have traversed a range of issues, from the role of women as sex-workers, to women as activists in local and national movements, to freedom-fighters in the arms struggle for emancipation, to complex, evolving beings implicated in a variety of lived human practices. I have tried to view women in the broad and multiple currents of human history. But I’m far from exhausting the field of the possible, as far as women are concerned.

### **Bangladeshi Women Under Unevenly Developed Global Capitalism**

*MLH: How do you think capitalism has affected women in Bangladesh? Also, what relationship do you see between patriarchy and capitalism in Bangladesh?*

**SH:** Bangladesh is a territorially small, extremely poor, densely populated, governance-wise failed, developing country. The mainstay of this country's economy is, indisputably, agriculture. Yet the undeniable, but uneven, development of global capitalism has decisively contributed to the marginalization of the majority of Bangladeshi people, particularly brutally marginalizing women in Bangladesh. Today there is this buzz-word in circulation: "globalization." It has even established a global hegemony. This is actually shackled to capitalism itself. Because what has been called "globalization" has been created by capitalism's one-world order.

Under capitalism, the poor nation-state itself keeps forcing women to face the market. Indeed, the female garment workers are the direct victims of this market economy, another name for capitalism. These female garment workers do not have any social status whatsoever in the country. From factories to the streets, everywhere, they are simultaneously the victims of anti-life wages and brutal sexual harassment, resulting in rape. Sometimes, however, her labor is glorified in terms of earning foreign currency for not the worker, but for the capitalist. Needless to say, the female laborer does not have any share, whatsoever, in the profit. Then there is the problem of the commodity market. Again, Bangladeshi women are variously involved in the commodity market. To put it bluntly, in reality, women are treated no better than commodities themselves. The body of the woman is the source of the pleasure in the male-dominated culture, while the body of the woman is always the lucrative site for the capitalist advertisers. The female body is sold continuously in a variety of ways, when profits over people are primary. The poor nation-state, in response to the logic of capital, thus governs the very body of women in



Bangladesh, and tends to govern everything she has or does. In other words, Bangladeshi women are variously proletarianized under capitalism.

Currently, big and small capital [in other words, profit], within a religion-based state structure, tends to relegate women in a variety of ways to the domestic sphere as well.

Democracy as the rule and regime of men, under such circumstances, does not help women much. Also, there are fundamentalists in the country. They have, for instance, taken a stance against even the minimally pro-women policy called “National Women Development Policy, 2008.” Over the course of the thirty-seven years since the independence of Bangladesh, the fundamentalists themselves have become capitalists in a number of ways, while both capitalism and fundamentalism—going hand-in-hand—have proven to be decisively anti-women.

### **Literature as Resistance**

*MLH: As a writer, how do you see the role of literature in social protests, resistance movements, and change?*

**SH:** I take literature as an artistic medium, among other things. Literature is no slogan. Yet an impressive body of resistance literature has come into being without sacrificing the artistic and aesthetic qualities of literary works. Indeed, in the history of humanity, such resistance literature served as a weapon of women and men in their struggles against oppression. During the Russian revolution, for instance, the poems of Pushkin used to circulate from pocket to pocket of the revolutionaries. The plays of Bertolt Brecht exemplarily staged resistance to capitalism. To an extent, the plays of Henrik Ibsen were instrumental in bringing about certain changes in the lives

of women. Some drama critics have interpreted Nora's act of slamming the door in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as the sound of feminist inauguration in Europe. In other words, even given these brief examples, it's clear that literature can play a consequential role in bringing about certain changes—at least at the level of consciousness.

In fact, the theater in particular has its unique strengths because it can establish an active contact with the masses through the actors themselves who animate, inspire, and educate the consciousness of the people. In Bangladesh, too, the theater has played a very crucial role politically as well as in advancing feminist causes by influencing and inspiring the masses. Currently, the street theaters in Bangladesh have exemplarily fought against religious secretarianism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression. The theater has also specifically protested various oppressive practices of the bourgeois national ruling-classes and the governments. In fact, the common people have received certain information as well about what the government has done—information they would not have received otherwise. The people also find answers to their own questions in some of these wonderfully-crafted “problem” plays.

Poetry, too, has been a tool of resistance right from the birth of literature itself. Numerous indestructible verse-lines have continued to remain with us for hundreds of years. When Simone de Beauvoir says that “One is not born a woman, but becomes one,” then it seems that the struggle continues this way.

Literary production involves powerful structures of expression. These structures can transcend time, or may not transcend time. Some structures might dissolve in the dustbin of

history. That is why a writer needs to be active and vigilant continuously in an attempt to recreate her own social structure, while simultaneously recreating her own life. Indeed, it is literature that can offer you a line like “the full moon is a piece of scorched bread.”<sup>2</sup> This one line brings together capital, famine, women’s status, and the failure of the bourgeois democratic nation-state, all at once.

### **Feminism is...**

*MLH: Please share some of your ideas regarding the term “feminism.” What does it mean to you?*

**SH:** For me, feminism designates a totality of practices relating to women. Feminism involves a total knowledge of women, a woman’s own world, her rights, her freedom are all relevant to feminism. Feminism means women’s struggles against patriarchal oppression and suppression. It is true that for a long time, global epistemologies have been dominated by the knowledge-practices of men, while ignoring and even brutally suppressing women’s life experiences, knowledges, merits, and creativity. Feminism means taking stock of the situation and destroying it. In other words, feminism means expanding one’s own self. Feminism means establishing oneself with full dignity. Feminism means expanding one’s own horizon. Feminism is power. Feminism is the establishment of power. Feminism is the struggle for total emancipation and equality.

## Politics

*MLH: Do you think that engagement with politics helps literary productions, or serves as an obstacle to them?*

**SH:** Every novel I have produced so far is politically engaged. No person living as a citizen of a country can live outside of political relations. Politics influences her or him directly or indirectly. If we take into account human practices such as cultivating, harvesting, fishing, horticulture, gardening, and if we make connections between the market prices and such practices, then the very act of eating rice itself turns out to be political. True, there are some who can eat rice and fish easily. And there are some who simply cannot. In fact, politics extends from the kitchen table to rickshaw pulling. In other words, we cannot simply demarcate boundaries and borders to politics. It is extended from direct state-power to the grassroots. I, for one, believe that a politically-conscious citizenry is one of the fundamental conditions of democracy. In the sense of upholding citizens' rights within a given state-structure, all of my novels are nothing short of political, although this is not the only sense in which they are political. There is a great deal of politics in my love stories as well, because love itself is not dissociated from society. The characters appearing in love stories are social beings, variously involved in power struggles. In fact, I have an explicitly political novel called *Gaayatree Sondhya* (The Pious Evening), a novel that traverses a period of time from the partition of India in 1947 to the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

## **U.S. Imperialism**

*MLH: How do you see the role of U.S. imperialism with regard to women, particularly in the third world?*

**SH:** U.S. imperialism, all over the world, has not left women alone by any means. It is U.S. imperialism that has introduced the shariah law in Iraq by eliminating the earlier, secular laws and thus destroying the roots of secularism in that country. It is true that one of the major targets of religion is to oppress and suppress women. It is also true that the Taliban in Afghanistan have brutally shackled women. Now the U.S. has replaced the Taliban, although U.S. imperialism has waxed lyrical on the need for women's liberation. But, in reality, the oppressive structures of male domination have not disappeared by any means. It is true that women's liberation is impossible within a system that legitimizes institutional hierarchies. I should also point out that U.S. imperialism provides direct support to even backward and oppressive monarchies in the Middle East, while monarchies have traditionally been against women.

Bangladesh as a country does not remain outside the rule of U.S. imperialism. Various fundamentalist forces in this country have been supported by U.S. imperialism. Recently the National Development Policy (2008) has been opposed by the fundamentalist forces in the country. This opposition itself reveals that the issue here is not merely religious but also political. There is an attempt to take women back to the Middle Ages. This is, indeed, a machination, a machination that is supported by the state itself. And when the state supports it, the state cannot hide its links to U.S. imperialism. On top of all this, the new market order that goes by the name of "globalization" has variously devastated women. As I have indicated earlier, the

commodification of women is directly linked to the logic of capitalism, which is further linked to imperialism itself. Thus, in a developing country like Bangladesh, women suffer on multiple levels, while they are treated as pawns in the games of capitalism and imperialism.

### **Concluding Remarks: Women, Men, Hegemony of Patriarchy, and Emancipation**

*MLH: What else would you like to share about your work and your interpretation of feminist politics?*

**SH:** In my writings, I variously identify the sites of unequal relations between men and women. In terms of their inequities, for instance, I show how a patriarchal mindset and outlook do not approve of a woman's own sexual pleasure. In other words, women are not allowed to have their own sexual and erotic pleasure—there is no sexual freedom for them. Whether a woman chooses to sell her body or not is, of course, up to her. There is the question of agency here. In my novels, I show how women sell their own bodies, while I examine the social structures in which they do it. And I variously subvert male authority and domination. I try to develop a culture of equality as a way of life through challenging patriarchy, among other forms of oppression. In my novels, I try to show and even exemplify the explicit roles of women in protests and resistances. The anticolonial national liberation war of Bangladesh was not only a male phenomenon. In my writings I have shown that women boldly and variously contributed to the liberation movement and, in fact, participated at many levels. I have made analogies sometimes between how a male freedom-fighter loses an important limb of his body during the armed struggle and how a woman gets raped during the same struggle. Both are fighters. But women, still, have more to lose and thus more to contribute.

But I also examine the ways that women themselves—when they get state-power—can be abusive of power itself, reproducing, if not combating, patriarchy. In fact, it is patriarchy itself that even prompts women to grab state-power for individualist reasons. But women's struggles themselves show that women do not easily give in to the oppressions of the coercive state apparatuses. In my writings, I prioritize women's individual, familial, social and governmental roles and contributions.

In other words, I continue to challenge patriarchy in all sorts of ways. Since I am a writer and a creative writer, in my stories and novels—which I take as artistic medium, as I have already indicated—I mobilize and enact my challenges and resistances at various levels in terms of structures, symbols, motifs, images, allegories, and so on, while I do not hesitate to be blatantly politically explicit when the need arises.