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**No place for a white woman? An exploration of the interplay of gender, race and class on power relations experienced by white western women in cross-cultural settings.**

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**January, 2012**

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## Introduction

‘What happens when the discourses we inhabit contrast strongly with or are in direct conflict with the discourses which swirl around us?’ asks feminist activist and academic Leckie Hopkins (2009, pp. 75-76). More particularly, how does a life writer interact with the discourses that swirl around her? The advice given in guides on memoir and autobiographical writing creates an illusion that life writers not only have the freedom to write what they like but that, somehow, they have a moral duty to do so. Life writers can ‘challenge our society’s enormous untruthfulness,’ writes David Parker (cited in Helen, 2006, p. 326). Other authors urge life writers to stand by the courage of their convictions and question the status quo to arrive at new answers and a truth that is different from that ‘embedded ideology masquerading as common knowledge’ (Forche & Gerard cited in Helen, 2006, p. 321). Lynne Bloom warns that ‘no matter what their subjects think ...nonfiction writers defending the integrity of their work should not...expose their material either to censorship or to consensus’(cited in Helen, 2006, p. 344). However, in contrast to these carefree injunctions to memoirists to be truth-seekers, Drusilla Modjeska acknowledges the difficulties implicit in life writing and warns in her fictionalised biography, *Poppy*, that ‘there is conformity and dependence in our freedom.’ She refers to a ‘an intellectual freedom [that is] institutionally hobbled, or fashion bound’ (1990, p. 5).

The ongoing tension between an espoused freedom of speech and moral duty as a writer to write fearlessly and honestly to create a ‘truth’ that seeks new answers and the intellectual hobbling caused by embedded and fashion bound discourses is the underlying theme of this essay. Despite an initial determination to follow the advice of these life-writing experts, I have found that in producing a fictionalized memoir in Australia today, exposure to a certain degree of intellectual hobbling is an inevitable part of the process and that challenging the status quo embedded in powerful discourses can be a perilous business. The pressure to conform to the consensus, resulting in a significant amount of external and internal censorship, has been difficult to resist.

As a relatively fearless, well-educated, well-travelled, sassy, feminist-leaning, culturally sensitive, single and early-40s white western woman setting out to write a memoir about my experiences of living and working and travelling in the Middle

East, I quickly discovered that the two most challenging discourses that swirled around me, and with which I was unavoidably required to negotiate, were the discourses of cultural relativism and of postfeminism. Let me explain further. Firstly, in considering the discourse of cultural relativism, I refer to the censorship and consensus imposed by a rigid form of cultural relativism often espoused by liberal left wing commentators and intellectual elites in Australia today. This particular kind of cultural relativism adheres to the view that ‘there are or there can be no value judgements that are true, that is, objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures’ (Schmidt cited in Renteln, 1990) or simply that the practices of other cultures must not be judged by those outside the culture as right or wrong, good or bad, but as just different. Driven by white western guilt, and frequently expressed as well-intentioned hyper-cultural sensitivity and deference, the practice of a rigid form of cultural relativism nonetheless often subverts its intention by appearing patronising or indulgently patriarchal towards cultural customs from which the cultural relativist is conveniently distanced. Consequently, this form of cultural relativism can simply recreate the hierarchical power structures and binary oppositions that cultural relativism was originally designed to avoid. Ironically, its very rigidity is the problem. In particular, I am interested in how the practice of this rigid form of cultural relativism can reinforce a static and idealized image of traditional cultures, ignoring their dynamic nature, internal hegemonies and resistance. It can fail to recognize that other cultures might have their own subjective resistances to western culture and that mutual respect and cultural sensitivity involve ongoing dialogue and an exchange of ideas between equal partners where neither assumes a positional superiority.

Above all, I am interested in how this rigid form of cultural relativism can impinge on the human and civil rights of women. My fictionalized memoir grapples with the dilemmas of working across many cultures in an Arab Gulf state where every day I was forced to make value judgments and ethical judgments and to act upon them. This is where the tension between intellectual hobbling and embedded or fashion bound thinking versus the realities of working on the ground resides for me. As a result, my own ethical bottom line, carefully established from decades of feminist and culturally sensitive thinking and practice, stretched and re-made itself the longer I stayed in the Arab Gulf state. Beginning with the minimalist belief that physical and emotional violence against women is wrong, it extended to a woman’s universal right to self-

determination and, finally, to a universal belief in the worth and dignity of the human spirit.

Secondly, I refer to the embedded or fashion bound thinking largely disseminated by the media that western women now live in a postfeminist world where, as the prefix 'post' suggests, women have been empowered to achieve equality with men and that any kind of feminist commentary, debate or action, and particularly victim narrative, is now redundant (Owen, Stein, & Vande Berg, 2007, pp. 2-11). This particular form of postfeminism can also be described as a commodity and pro-sex postfeminism and is strongly aligned with neo-capitalism (Owen, et al., 2007, pp. 123-124). The flipside of this discourse on empowerment, ability to choose, consumption and sexuality is the implicit suggestion that failure to achieve in any of these areas, particularly any victimhood or pain narratives resulting from rape, can no longer considered to be linked to systemic failure but rather to personal failure resulting from poor choices and lack of risk assessment (Bourke, 2007, p. 434). In this essay, I not only challenge the suggestion that we now live in a **postfeminist** world but also argue that in the last decade many western female memoirists such as Kate Holden, Tegan Wagner and Lynne Minion have placed a glossy theoretical pro-sex and commodity postfeminist spin on their experiences, rebranding pain as empowerment and, at the same time, have neglected to include any accompanying analysis of the cultural systems that helped create their experiences, particularly if that culture is not their own.

Strongly influenced by the two discourses on rigid cultural relativism and postfeminism that swirled around me, the original purpose of my fictionalized memoir and critical essay was to question the notion, originating in imperialist times and perpetuated by victim narratives over the last few decades, that the Middle East is, and was, no place for a white woman. With the work of cultural relativists such as Milton J. Bennett as a major influence, I intended to demonstrate cultural relativism by juxtaposing positive aspects of Arab Moslem culture alongside negative aspects of western culture. Also strongly influenced by postfeminist rhetoric, I was originally determined to demonstrate how my promotion to senior level within the government of an Arab Gulf state provided proof that women could achieve equity with men in the workplace. In particular, I intended to stress that 'feminine' skills such as collaboration and parity enhanced cross-cultural communication to neutralize the victim mentality of Arab Moslems and that my female status granted me a privileged



position denied my male Western counterparts – access to the world of both Gulf Arab Moslem men **and** women. Above all, I was determined to expose the racist and erroneous mythology and stereotypes about Arab Moslem culture perpetuated by western media and literature in both colonial and modern times.

In the course of writing my memoir I made many changes to my original writing plan, each in relation to these two powerful discourses. First, I found it necessary to move from a straight life writing exercise to writing a fictionalised memoir. Next, in attempting to explore the vulnerability I experienced as a single western woman in the Middle East, I have sometimes found it necessary to foreground issues of gender while apparently ignoring or suppressing issues of race or culture. In some instances, I have been deliberately provocative in order to challenge the assumptions of both postfeminism and cultural relativism.

Ironically, while the discourses of postfeminism and cultural relativism have initially led me to construct positive memories of working in the Gulf, I found that the postmodernist deconstructive process of writing a fictionalized memoir chipped away at the notion of empowerment and allowed me to see the situation in a different light: namely, that the success that my character Eliza enjoyed in the workplace, along with a luxurious lifestyle, disposable income and travel to exotic destinations, was hard-fought, limited and fleeting due to a series of sexist events involving harassment, bullying and corruption by both Moslem and western men that undermined her authority, confidence and energy until, for the sake of her mental and physical health, she chose to resign from her job and leave the Gulf. In the final chapter of my fictionalized memoir, Eliza reluctantly concludes that this Arab Gulf state is no place for her, and possibly no place for any woman who wishes to occupy public male space:

*‘It’s all a big fat lie, Bruce. We’re told that women can have it all. That we live in some TV world where all the judges are black women. It’s just not true.’*

*‘You’ve proved you can have most of it.’*

*‘At a cost. At a very high cost. It’s all too hard. I don’t want to be a superwoman. I don’t want to become like a man. I don’t want to seek the protection of men. It shouldn’t have to be this hard. I’m not prepared to do it anymore. I just want to go home, live a quiet life, surrounded by kind people, and furry friends, and grow some veges. To live some parallel life to the patriarchy, to this dog-eat-dog capitalism. I just want to go home where I am*

*free to walk, to swim, to be where ever I like without being harassed. Where civil laws protect me. Surely that's my right. A human right. To pass freely on this planet?' (Rumney, 2012, p. 210)*

This essay is an attempt to explore the reasons why I changed the kind of memoir I wrote. It is an examination of the interplay of gender, race and class on power relationships experienced by myself, and other white western female memoirists, in mostly intercultural settings. In particular, the essay explores how this examination caused me to acknowledge the power of the particular discourses of cultural relativism and postfeminism prevalent in Australia today, and to challenge those aspects that impinge upon the human and civil rights of women. I became especially interested in defending women's capacity for self-determination and a life where the worth and dignity of their human spirit is respected.

This essay is also an attempt to explain why, in challenging the discourses of cultural relativism and postfeminism, I elected to write my fictionalized memoir in resistance to what I see as a standard blueprint for white western female memoirists in Australia. The blueprint, as I see it, insists that in order to avoid charges of racism, neo-imperialism and western bias, memoirists should exercise rigid cultural relativism expressed as hyper-cultural sensitivity and deference with an accompanying denigration of western culture; that in order to avoid charges of playing into the mythology that white women are at sexual risk from black men, or of appropriation of the Other's story, memoirists should avoid or only briefly engage in any negative commentary on the other culture in relation to sexual harassment of the memoirist or violation of the human rights of local women; that while sexual promiscuity or aggression is now acceptable for the pro-sex postfeminist western woman memoirist, and possibly encouraged by the publishing world, memoirists should still strive to be liked by their readers and thus elide or explain in detail and apologize for any breaches in *nice* behaviour such as anger, violence, revenge or unworthy thoughts; and that, in the tradition of 'chick lit', single women should be seeking love and preferably 'get their man' at the end of the memoir.

In order to explore the above issues I will be drawing upon a wide range of sources that have influenced and informed me as I wrote both the fictionalized memoir and the essay. These sources include the work of both well-known and lesser known academics, intellectuals, philosophers, social commentators and activists, as well as sources from popular media such as television programs, newspaper articles, novels

and memoirs. Clearly, these sources reflect my own position as both academic **and** activist on the ground, and the conflicting discourses that sometimes result from such a positioning.

The two powerful discourses of rigid cultural relativism and postfeminism collide and collude in many of the areas under discussion and this will be reflected in the structure of my essay. While attempting to examine these two discursive influences on my work as separate issues, there will be times when the essay juggles the two discourses simultaneously to reflect the enmeshed nature of their influence.

The essay is roughly divided into three sections. The first section, 'Cultural Relativism and the Human Rights of Women,' concentrates on discussion of the discourse of cultural relativism and its impact on discourses advocating the human rights of women and how these discourses influence the work of white western women memoirists in cross-cultural settings. The second section, 'The Politics of Representation: the legitimacy of writing on behalf of others,' with four sub-sections, explores the vexed politics of representation, particularly the legitimacy to write on behalf of others, and under what circumstances, and how these discourses influence the work of some novelists and female memoirists. The third section, 'Postfeminisms' is divided into two sub-sections and reviews the discourse of various postfeminisms and how these discourses influence the work of some women memoirists. The second sub-section specifically focuses on the sexual harassment of women in male space and its implications for white western privilege as it applies to white western women. The essay concludes with a summary reflection on the themes explored and on the incidents and events in the memoir illustrating those themes.

## Cultural Relativism and the Human Rights of Women

When I was studying for a Master's Degree in Intercultural and International Management in 1993-94 in Vermont, USA, the guiding principle of the course was a rigid form of cultural relativism based on Milton J. Bennett's developmental model of cultural sensitivity. This model identified thirteen specific stages of development from the ethnocentric stages of denial, defence and minimization, each with their own sub-categories, through to the ethnorelative stages of acceptance, adaptation and integration, also containing sub-categories. Bennett stressed that people should not judge the behaviour of others using the standards of their own culture, and 'that there is no absolute standard of rightness or "goodness" that can be applied to cultural behavior. Cultural difference is neither good nor bad, it is just different' (1993, p. 46). Addressing the attendant implication that other cultures cannot be criticized and possibly equating cultural with ethical relativism, Bennett asks 'Does ethnorelativism imply moral acquiescence to each and every cultural value, no matter how personally repugnant?' He answers that:

*a state of ethnorelativism does not imply an ethical agreement with all difference nor a disavowal of stating (and acting upon) a preference for one world view over another. The position does imply, however, that ethical choices will be made on grounds other than the ethnocentric protection of one's own worldview or in the name of absolute principles. (1993, p. 46)*

Bennett has chosen his words carefully. It would appear that he recommends tolerance in the first instance and only then oblique criticism of cultural practices to which one may be ethically opposed through the choice and implementation of an alternative world view. Although not specifically stated, it is assumed that Bennett would not recommend overt criticism of a cultural value found to be personally repugnant and would strongly oppose any form of direct intervention in its practice.

My international and intercultural career spans twenty-four years. During that time I have lived and worked for extended periods in eight different countries. Through sometimes bitter experience and much soul-searching I gradually came to question Bennett's notion that cultural beliefs and customs can never be judged right or wrong, good or bad, just different. In particular, I questioned the application of Bennett's

notions to the cultural beliefs and customs that apply solely to women. Consequently, I share Gayatri Spivak's concerns about 'quick-fix training institutes that prepare international civil society workers, including human rights advocates, with uncomplicated standards for success' and her belief that specific literary training, 'a slow mind-changing process' is necessary to undo 'cultural relativism as cultural absolutism' (2004, p. 531). Although Bennett himself warns of applying absolute principles when stating a preference for one worldview over another, I would argue that the discourse in which his definition of cultural relativism is embedded – that cultural beliefs and customs can never be judged as good or bad, just different – carries a form of cultural absolutism in itself. This simplistic and rigid definition of cultural relativism neatly elides the complexities of cross-cultural interaction: its danger, in my view, is that it can work specifically against the human rights of women.

While some aspects of Bennett's categories of cross-cultural sensitivity (or cross-cultural competency as it now tends to be called) remain pertinent for my work across cultures, I also find myself guided by the arguments of academics, philosophers, activists, journalists and social commentators who challenge his rigid definition of cultural relativism. It is not the intention of this essay to provide concrete answers. Rather, I intend to read particular incidents in my life story/fictionalised memoir in resistance to the discourses of cultural relativism and postfeminism which inevitably frame them. In particular, the occasions of my resistance to being subjected to formulaic discursive positionings are often occasions where race, class and gender intersect to trouble and loosen the smug certainties of the overarching discourses.

At a time of global financial crisis, much ethnic and civil unrest and an estimated '43.7 million people ... forcibly displaced from their homes by conflict or persecution' around the globe (Brothers, 2011, p. A6), some political leaders in Europe and the United Kingdom are beginning to question aspects of their policies on multiculturalism and immigration. For example, British Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated in a speech that 'Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values' (2011). In contrast, the Labor government in Australia recently reiterated its firm commitment to

multiculturalism through the establishment of a People of Australia Ambassador program and the inclusion of cultural competency skills training into the national school curriculum (McDougall, 2011). Accordingly, there has been a rise in the number of articles, radio and television programs devoted to the exploration of multiculturalism and related issues. I have been following many of these with great interest over the last four years.

A significant amount of media attention has been focused on Somali refugee, ex-Dutch-politician and feminist author, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has written several texts about her childhood and fundamentalist Islam. Her experiences and opinions string together some of the issues I wish to discuss in this essay: firstly, cultural relativism versus the human rights of women; secondly, racism and the legitimacy of those who speak on behalf of, or comment on, minority cultures; and, more briefly, the liberal left privileging of racism over sexism.

Considered ‘one of the most prominent critics of Islam and particularly the religion’s attitude towards women’ (Weisser, 2008, p. 29), Ali’s own legitimacy to comment on Islamic culture appears to be iron-clad: genitally mutilated as a child, fleeing her family to avoid an arranged marriage and living with a death threat from an extremist Islamic group since 2004, Ali’s experience of both fundamentalist and militant Islam is deep and personal. Furthermore, her experiences of life and education in the West, in both the Netherlands and the USA, have provided her with the opportunity to make what Bennett refers to as ‘systematic contrastive analysis’ (1993, p. 65) between her own cultural assumptions and those of the west.

Drawing upon the ideals of the Enlightenment, and the writings of John Stuart Mill on the subjection of women, Ali challenges the west to reconsider its embrace of multiculturalism. She argues that the ‘shift from the idea of universal human rights to cultural or relative rights’ explains the ‘persistently inferior position of women outside the West’ (2010c, p. 5). She argues, too, that ‘the rise in the West of movements that celebrate cultural diversity has provided old misogynistic traditions with the legitimacy they need’ including such practices as ‘polygamy, child marriage, marital rape, honour killings, wife beating, selective abortion of female fetuses’ (2010c, p. 5). Advocating overt intervention by the west in these areas, Ali argues that westerners ‘need to educate non-Western women to recognize the discriminatory beliefs and ethos of their own cultures and religions’ (2010c, p. 5). She emphatically denies that this is a form of western imperialism or paternalism. In doing so she

disagrees with feminist academic commentators such as Germaine Greer who wrote that it would be ‘an attack on cultural identity’ (cited in Ali, 2010b, p. 224) to prevent genital mutilation of girls. Ali celebrates her own freedom to speak while bemoaning the discursive constraints confronting feminist academics such as Greer: ‘unlike white commentators hamstrung by the fear of being labelled racists, I could voice my criticisms of the feudal and religious mechanisms that were holding Muslim women back’ (2010a, pp. 20-21). In this way, Ali endorses Pamela Bone’s comments in *The Australian* that:

*behind Greer’s enthusiastically received comments is the dreary cultural relativism that pervades the thinking of so many of those once described as on the Left. We are no better than they are. We should not impose our values on them. We can criticize only our own ... Odd that so many old feminists think racism is worse than sexism. (cited in Ali, 2010b, p. 225)*

Bone’s analysis alerts us to the ways in which, under a rigid definition of cultural relativism, racism can be privileged over sexism leading, as Ali suggests, to the erosion of human rights for women outside the west (2010c, p. 5).

The issue of racism versus sexism was raised in a recent article in *The Weekend Australian* by journalist Emma Tom. In reference to the epithet ‘black cunt’ directed towards an indigenous footballer, Greg Inglis, by Andrew Johns, Tom acknowledges the ‘racist nature’ of the slur and includes Carole Ford’s comment that ‘incredibly, the inherent sexism in this phrase remains unchallenged’ (cited in Tom, 2010, p. 8). The editor of *The Weekend Australian*, referring to the incident described above, comments that ‘concern at being labelled racist can stifle discussion on cultural differences and end up disadvantaging, rather than helping, particular groups’ (Editorial Commentary, 2010, p. 15). Zoltan Kovacs of *The West Australian* refers to the ‘tremendous deterrent power’ the word ‘racist’ has acquired in everyday language and comments that ‘many people of goodwill and decent instincts probably are diffident about discussing issues that touch on race for fear of being denounced as racists’ (2010, p. 36). Kovacs’ comments resonate with me. In the writing of my fictionalized memoir and this essay, I have experienced ongoing anxiety about being labelled racist and have exercised caution when describing my interactions with people from other cultures. To some extent, I would say that my fear of being denounced as racist has interfered with the integrity of my fictionalized memoir. Despite Lynne Bloom’s warning not to expose my work to censorship and consensus,

I have done just that; on several occasions, I have failed to honestly report through the character of Eliza the emotions and thoughts I experienced at the time.

I have also experienced anxiety upon discovering that some of my views align with those who represent the conservative right. However, it would appear, as represented in the above conservative newspapers, that it is often the conservative right, not the liberal left, who is championing the human rights of women in both developed and developing countries by questioning aspects of cultural relativism and its effect on multiculturalism. Ali provides a possible answer to this phenomenon. Currently employed with a right-wing think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, she writes that liberals tend to think ‘collectively about ethnicities, cultural groups and religion’ whereas conservatives are ‘more concerned with individual rights – and perhaps less subject to political correctness’ or in this case ‘misplaced respect for cultural difference’ (2010a, p. 21).) Another critic of this politics of difference, is Todd Gitlin, cited by Turner, who believes that liberals have ‘betrayed the positive values of the Enlightenment’ leaving ‘modern society exposed to “culture wars”’ (2002, p. 56).

The discomfort I feel at agreeing with some of the arguments posed by right wing commentators such as Ali is tempered by British feminist academic Nira Yuval-Davis’ descriptions of late twentieth-century activists with particular ideas ‘taking root’ temporarily, aligning with others similarly positioned and ‘shifting’ when the change of discourse allows or demands it. These manoeuvres are in direct contrast to the intense and total identification with one side or the other demanded by earlier activist engagements of the 1960s and 70s, and are perhaps best illustrated by Hopkins’ metaphorical image of seaweed shifting with the currents to align first this way then that, while keeping firmly anchored in the seabed or an ethical base (cited in Hopkins, 2009, p. 163).

Consequently, with a firm ethical foundation based on a woman’s universal right to self-determination and the universal worth and dignity of the human spirit, I have no qualms about simultaneously holding several opinions from a variety of different sources. As Hopkins would argue, I occupy a place where ‘simultaneity is privileged, where *both-and* replace *either-or*’ (2009, p. 26). My engagement with the ethical specificity and complexity of particular situations means that I can find myself agreeing with commentators from conservative newspapers who believe that fear of being labelled racist can stymie debate on cross-cultural issues **and** sharing feminist



concerns that racism is being privileged over sexism, while also acknowledging Bonnie Honig's warning that 'feminists ought to be careful lest they participate in the recent rise of national xenophobia by projecting a rightly feared backlash ... onto foreigners who come from somewhere else and bring their foreign (supposedly) "backward" cultures with them' (1999, p. 36).

This simultaneity of opposing view points arising from examination of the influence of race, gender and class on power relations, is evident in the extract from my fictionalized memoir below when the protagonist Eliza is deciding whether to give permission for her stalker to be lashed:

*Like a rat in a cage on my head, this race stuff was gnawing through my skull with its complexities, its myriad of counter-arguments and layers of truth. If Everton were white, would they have suggested the lashing? But a black guy has become president of the USA before a white woman. Who has the greater privilege?*

*I remembered the workshops on the "isms" that I attended while studying for my Master's degree. Sexism, racism, ageism, elitism. We were shown a documentary – it compared how white women and black men were treated when doing three things – buying a car, renting a house and applying for a job. The white woman only received preferential treatment when trying to rent an apartment. She paid more than the black guy for the second hand car, and she was given a secretarial position while he was offered a management position, despite having identical qualifications and experience. And then the black woman giving the workshop said racism could only go one way - from the most powerful to the least. She didn't mention sub-groups or micro-cultures, or the relative status of white women and black men in developing countries. I know that in Japan in the 80's black guys were often refused service in restaurants and bars while I was invited in and given free cocktails and finger food. Who has the greater privilege?*

*It was like being in a snow dome. Someone had shaken it, and I was floating upside down, not knowing where I would land. Moslem Arab men had chosen to believe my word over that of a western man and were offering justice under sharia law to me, a Western woman. An infidel. They believed me but the western GM of the Four Seasons chose not to believe me. On the other hand, if I had gone alone to the police, without the backing of Rashid and the Ministry*

*and a squeaky clean reputation, I would have been turfed out on my white western butt. And, of course, if Everton had been a white western guy ... If Hussein had not seen Everton strutting around the Four Seasons ... Yet another lashing for a black arse, but at the hands of Arabs who have kept black slaves up until just a few decades ago. Oh, the world is so messy. There's nothing cut and dried, ivory tower and ebony slum about this issue.*

*And I was still scared. Even though Hussein assured me that the judge would rule in my favour, I was worried that he might not. What if I ended up in gaol? What if it was my coconut ice butt that got lashed?*

*... Warily, I made my decision. I was tired, so, so tired. Restraining order only. It would stop at the restraining order.*

*Later that night, sleepless in bed, I wondered if I was letting Everton off the lash because he was black. Is this the curse of white western guilt? Was I compliant in allowing men from minority cultures get away with sexual crimes against women? (Rumney, 2012, p. 170)*

This passage highlights the agonising soul-searching that can accompany the simultaneous holding of opposing view points. It raises the following questions: Would it be easier for the memoirist, fearing accusations of racism, to follow a discourse of least resistance – that of a simplistic and rigid cultural relativism? But, in doing so, would the memoirist be standing by the courage of their convictions? And would they be compliant in neatly eliding the complexities of cross-cultural interaction with its inherent danger of working against the human rights of women?

Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to explore whether sexism is more fundamental than racism, it is necessary to acknowledge that this view has been widely criticized for not fully acknowledging the experiences of black women and men. While American poet and radical feminist activist Adrienne Rich refers to this phenomenon as ‘white solipsism,’ or ‘taking white experience as the paradigm through which to understand the world’ (La Caze, 2004, p. 262), contemporary Australian philosopher Marguerite La Caze believes that reflection on the basic similarity between the structure of racism and sexism can be fruitful, as long as one remains sensitive to the differences and the interactive nature of the two oppressions (2004, p. 278). French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, however, firmly believes that sexism is more fundamental when she writes ‘Who does not know the famous sentence: Man’s exploitation of man begins with man’s exploitation of woman?’

(2004, p. 198). While remaining sensitive to the differences between these two oppressions, in reference to specific incidents in my fictionalized memoir and other memoirs written by white western women, I will be arguing that, under the powerful influence of the discourses of cultural relativism and postfeminism, I believe that racism is being privileged over sexism on these occasions.

Before embarking on a more academically inclined exploration of cultural relativism versus the human rights of women, racism versus sexism, and the legitimacy of those who speak on behalf of the Other, I want to return to consideration of Ali's position as outlined above. I find it necessary to challenge both the monolithic view of Islam and the idealistic view of western culture that Ali presents. While fully respecting the ongoing trauma that fundamentalist and extremist Islam has produced in her life in terms of genital mutilation and death threats, I suggest that Ali could be resting in what Bennett refers to as the ethnocentric phase of *reversal* in her blanket enthusiasm for the west and blanket condemnation of Islam. According to Bennett, reversal 'involves a denigration of one's own culture and an attendant assumption of the superiority of a different culture' (1993, p. 39) and can be observed amongst colonized people, international volunteer workers, white workers in Indigenous communities, long-term or relatively new sojourners, those embracing the New Age lifestyle and environmentalists who idealize traditional cultures and their ties to the land. Although reversal appears to be culturally sensitive, Bennett points out that 'it is actually only changing the centre of ethnocentrism' (1993, p. 40).

Reversal is clearly exemplified in Cate Kennedy's memoir *Sing and Don't Cry: A Mexican Journal* which is scathing in its attack on western culture and, in particular, on white western privilege. Referring to the Mexican belief that a 'cold, blank, indifferent gaze' can freeze the heart of a baby,' she writes that it is 'no wonder Latin Americans swaddle their babies' faces away from tourists - all us Western Europeans and Anglos, shuffling blank-eyed off the tour bus ... we must look like walking epidemics, bloody Typhoid Marys of the Evil Eye' (2005, p. 50). Here, with her identity now clearly tied to the superiority of the Mexican culture, Kennedy is disassociating herself from her own inferior cultural background.

Towards the end of the memoir, still resting in the ethnocentric stage of reversal, she adopts a somewhat preachy tone when she writes:

*Do me a favour the next time you drop down to your local Vietnamese or Turkish or Greek or Italian or Chinese or African restaurant. Pause before*

*you order and just savour, for a minute, where you are. Your luck at being there, and your luck at being able to take it for granted...Make a toast to this - to debt, not amnesia. We should be attempting, humbly, to pronounce the names of these gifts being offered to us ...We should be saying grace.'* (2005, p. 65)

Directed to her readers in the second person, this well-intentioned message about white western privilege could be interpreted as sanctimonious, if not contradictory. If Mexican culture is superior in terms of values, sense of community and appreciation for the less material aspects of life, why would westerners savour their luck at being born into the western world with its hyper-consumerism and abundance of choice?

This is one of the dangers of the reversal stage of cultural-sensitivity – the assumption of superiority may alienate people from their own culture. Another inherent danger is that reversal can manifest itself in many ways – as patronising towards the culture not one's own, as cultural appropriation or voyeurism – and these attitudes and behaviours may also alienate people from the culture being upheld as superior. Although blind to her own possibly sanctimonious preaching, Kennedy was, however, aware of the risks of appropriating the misery of other people:

*The wretched suffering life of the crippled man begging outside the hotel might overwhelm us at first, but the way we process it is to claim that we're suffering too, as a result of just seeing it in passing. It's as if our nagging guilt is quickly quelled and repackaged, to re-emerge as the self-pitying, me-too victimhood we seem so strangely comforted by. In the end, we step over him, irritated for what he reminds us of, almost blaming him for making us feel even a flicker of discomfort. Living here, I'm constantly aware of how toxically self-indulgent such a response would be, and what a useless waste of energy and time. I'm uneasy even relating this now, presenting it as material to illustrate something about myself.* (2005, p. 200)

In this quotation, I find the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we' to be somewhat presumptuous. How can Kennedy presume to know what all westerners feel and think when confronted by a crippled beggar? To me, such a vehement refusal to appropriate the misery of others serves more as a showcase for Kennedy to display her heightened cultural sensitivity, giving the impression that she is following a blueprint for white western female memoirists: that is, in order to avoid charges of racism, neo-imperialism and western bias, she should exercise rigid cultural relativism

expressed as hyper-cultural sensitivity and deference with an accompanying denigration of western culture. This impression is given greater credence when the viewpoints of the protagonist in this memoir are compared with those of the protagonist in Kennedy's next published work.

After reading this memoir, I found it intriguing that in Kennedy's *The World Beneath* – this time a work of fiction – she questions the political correctness, including cultural sensitivity, that she championed in her memoir. Through the character of Rich, she comments on the cautious and ever-changing language that middle-class Australians employ when talking about disadvantaged groups: 'You had to watch yourself with language; it warped and morphed all the time, as if it wanted to catch you napping ... you could be turned on and criticized for everything even the things you didn't really mean ... There was offence everywhere' (2009, p. 26). Another character, Sandy, is mortified when a customer lectures her on 'cultural appropriation' for selling Native American dream catchers at her market stall (2009, p. 135). Perhaps Sandy believed, like philosopher, Tim Soutphommasane, that 'it is perfectly acceptable for people to borrow from other cultures without "living in" them' and that 'hybridity can be a good thing but it should happen with the right dose of respect and understanding' (2010, p. 7) and was dismayed to discover that her joy in discovering other cultures could be interpreted in such a negative light. Sandy also comments that 'everyone was kind of policing each other, everyone was under surveillance' (2009, p. 142) and 'it was gleeful, the smug catching out of others, the chance to know better. People came awake when they saw an opportunity for it. Their faces actually brightened' (2009, p. 143). When discussing my fictionalized memoir and essay in an academic setting, I have also experienced this kind of critical surveillance on occasions. Sometimes this led to feelings of guilt, self-censorship and eventual silence on my part. Having spent five and half years living in police states where 'Like the tap water, every word I spoke was being filtered before it passed my lips' (Rumney, 2012, p. 65), I found it somewhat disconcerting to be placed in a similar censorship situation in Australia.

Given that the attitude of Kennedy's fictional characters is quite a departure from the attitude of Kennedy in her memoir, I ponder over the reasons for this shift. Is Kennedy a canny and politically astute writer, able to switch discourses according to the current, fashion bound discourse desired by the publishing world? Has a fictional format enabled Kennedy to find the courage of her convictions in order to challenge

the powerful discourse of rigid cultural relativism? Did Kennedy move from the ethnocentric stage of reversal to a more ethnorelative stage on Bennett's developmental model of cultural sensitivity?

Bennett's reversal phase is part of a developmental model. Therefore, it could be assumed that, with greater systemic contrastive analysis, Ali may move towards a more balanced assessment of western culture and, in particular, re-examine her assertion that western women enjoy equality with men (2010c, p. 5). As previously stated, Ali challenges the west to reconsider its embrace of multiculturalism but appears to be referring only to Islamic culture. Referring to countries such as Saudi Arabia which declare that Islamic law can over-ride any article in the UN conventions that it signs, Ali states that 'these countries dismiss universal human rights as western imperialist norms. Meanwhile, the rise in the west of movements that celebrate cultural diversity has provided old misogynistic traditions with the legitimacy they need' (2010c, p. 5). With her focus mostly on misogynistic traditions in Islamic countries, Ali seems to be suggesting that all Moslem immigrants are fundamentalist in their practice of Islam.

Some Moslem scholars and commentators would refute these assumptions. For example, author and commentator on Islam, Waleed Aly, also stands at the 'intersection of these two conceptual entities we very loosely call 'Islam' and the 'West,'" (2007, p. xii), and yet sees the space between moderate and fundamentalist Moslems to be vibrant, diverse and passionate, sometimes inspiring, sometimes paralysing and sometimes disturbing, but he definitely does not see a 'simple binary world' and instead 'sees a world far too complex and sophisticated to be stuffed into two linguistic boxes' (2007, p. 54). In my fictionalized memoir, I endeavoured to reflect this Islamic complexity and diversity through the actions and opinions of my Gulf State colleagues and friends who ranged from fundamentalist to moderate Moslems. I felt comfortable commenting on aspects of Islamic culture that I found inspiring but, due to the surveillance on cultural sensitivity described in previous paragraphs, I felt extremely reticent, and even fearful, about commenting on aspects that I found disturbing such as face veiling. Consequently, I found myself carefully balancing any negative commentary on face veiling with an accompanying negative commentary on the attire of white western women:

*It was still happening. Every time I saw a covered woman I was jolted to the core. I knew that each woman eventually became recognizable as one*

*became used to the subtleties of Islamic dress so that the height or the particular step of a woman, or an extra centimetre of hem, or a quick glimpse of a definite shape under the sack, became as definable as red hair, chunky thighs or a favourite jumper for western women. But I still couldn't get over my discomfort. I found it alienating to not be able to see their face expressions. To not know where they were looking. To not catch the crinkle of a smile, lift of a brow, curl of a lip or indeed any muscle twitch. To have no hint of what they might be feeling. It was a shock that never seemed to abate. Encountering shrouded heads on a daily basis, working alongside them, and seeing dozens in the shopping malls, didn't lessen the effect. Maybe that was why I said what I said next.*

*'Oh look, there's a Gulf woman swimming.'*

*Nasser looked up from his shawarma in surprise. He followed my pointed finger to the black garbage bag drifting by, swirling in the current, and looked back at me, puzzled. He looked back to the bag. Then he got it. His first reaction was disapproval. He frowned, but then he thought a little bit more and a big grin broke out.*

*He touched the tip of my nose. 'You're very naughty, Eliza. You can't say things like that.'*

*We started laughing. I knew where my laughter was coming from. I was M.A.S.H-ing it, using sick humour to ward off the disquiet I actually felt. I don't know where Nasser's laughter was coming from but I assumed he was enjoying my irreverence. Who says Moslems don't have a sense of humour about their culture? Still chuckling, Nasser put our rubbish into a small white plastic bag and then peeled back the top part until the stained serviettes, wrapping paper and juice containers were half uncovered.*

*'Ah Eliza, I think that this rubbish too needs to go in the bin, no?'*

*Suddenly I was not so sure about the source of his laughter but I respected him more for making his point about western women.*

*'Touche,' I said. We burst into laughter again, heads close, and if I had not been in a public place in a Moslem country, I would probably have kissed him. (Rumney, 2012, pp. 67-68)*

As author of this text, I carefully and self-consciously juxtaposed the image of the oppressed, black veiled Moslem woman alongside the scantily-clad, licentious and

stained white western woman to present Eliza as a cultural relativist who is balanced in her commentary on both cultures. Ironically, in doing so, I found myself simultaneously setting up a binary opposition that cultural relativism was originally designed to avoid.

Such concerns about cultural sensitivity and the legitimacy to comment on aspects of Islamic culture do not arise for Pakistani immigrant to Britain, Ziauddin Sardar. His quest for spiritual knowledge and inquiry invokes not just an old Moslem literary tradition but also demonstrates the vibrant, diverse and passionate discourse between Moslems situated on the continuum between fundamentalist and moderate. The title of the book, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim*, is self-explanatory and demonstrates that many Moslem migrants are capable of systematic contrastive analysis between their own cultural assumptions and those of the west. As evidence, Sardar cites a fundamentalist acquaintance who states that his 'literalist, fundamentalist and revolutionary interpretations were all based on exceptionally arrogant notions of truth and certainty ... you [moderate Moslems] were correct. And we [fundamentalist Moslems], with our sense of moral superiority, were wrong' (Sardar, 2004, p. 340) disputing a commonly held assumption, and one held by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, that Moslem immigrants fail to respect or adapt to the beliefs, customs and laws of other cultures. In contrast to Sardar, Ali's view of traditional cultures to be static, unchanging and mostly uncontested is similar to the view held by the cultural relativists and multiculturalists that she criticizes. Furthermore, with greater systemic contrastive analysis, perhaps Ali could also present a more balanced argument by acknowledging that the west, with its own notions of moral superiority and arrogant notions of truth and certainty, has something to learn in turn from Islamic culture.

Let me now turn to a more academically-inclined exploration of cultural relativism versus the human rights of women and the legitimacy of those who speak on behalf of the other. In *International Human Rights: Universalism Versus Relativism*, Alison Dundes Renteln argues that the most contentious aspect of the debate on international human rights or universalism versus cultural relativism is 'the extent to which relativists must tolerate intolerance' and the crux of the debate is 'whether or not it is possible to establish cross-cultural universals' (1990, p. 61). Commenting on the assumed mutually exclusive nature of universalism and relativism, she argues that 'the recognition of moral diversity calls into question the presumption of universals and leaves human rights vulnerable to the apparent dangers of relativism' (1990, p.



60). With its emphasis on tolerance and the attendant assumption that no moral criticism of other cultures is allowed, she observes that cultural relativism is often confused with ethical relativism. Consequently, she disagrees with the definition that ‘there are and there can be no value judgements that are true, that is, objectively justifiable independent of specific cultures’ (Schmidt cited in Renteln, 1990, p. 71) held by the foundation cultural relativists such as Ruth Benedict (1935) and Melville Herskovits (1958) whom she describes as ‘extreme.’ Instead she believes that ‘*some* evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise’ (1990, p. 69) and that cultural relativism must be reformulated in a way that acknowledges both ‘the role of both enculturation and ethnocentrism’ (1990, p. 75). Hence, in contrast to Bennett who believes that ethical choices should not be made for ethnocentric protection of one’s own worldview or in the name of absolute principles, Renteln argues that there is nothing to prevent relativists from critiquing or passing comment on the activities or beliefs of other cultures **as long as they acknowledge** that this criticism is based upon their own ethnocentric beliefs and that it may constitute some form of cultural imperialism. Furthermore, she reiterates David Bidney’s belief that ‘under extreme circumstances, meaning that an action in another culture violates one of the relativists’ most deeply held beliefs, the relativists may decide that criticism and even intervention are less evils than either ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism’ (cited in Renteln, 1990, p. 77). Convinced that cultural diversity does not preclude the possibility that many moral principles are shared across the globe, Renteln believes that ‘[we] must search for cross-cultural universals to buttress human-rights standards for which a universal consensual *already* exists’ (1990, p. 139).

Bryan Turner echoes these views. While supporting Michael Ignatieff’s belief that the west has granted too much concession to local customs such as female genital mutilation and his argument that ‘[while] people from different cultures may continue to disagree about what is good ... [they] nevertheless agree about what is insufferably, unarguably wrong,’ Turner believes that a stronger argument can be made about the unity of human misery than a consensus on what is insufferably wrong, and supports Barrington Moore’s statement that ‘a general opposition to human suffering constitutes a standpoint that both transcends and unites different cultures and historical epochs’ (2002, p. 55). Martha Nussbaum also believes that broad cross-cultural consensus can be found in this manner and that, by examining the tragic plots across cultures, certain deprivations can be ‘understood to be terrible, despite

differences in metaphysical understandings of the world' (2000, p. 74). These arguments refute Bennett's assertion that cultural differences cannot be judged good or bad, just different. Building on the views of Renteln, Turner and Nussbaum, I would argue that certain deprivations, such as lack of self-determination in choosing a spouse, can lead to terrible suffering and could be deemed unarguably wrong despite different understandings of the world. I explore this view in my fictionalized memoir through the character of Rasha. Forced by her parents to marry a man she has never met and having suffered terribly throughout the marriage, Rasha begins to examine her enculturation:

*'I will never marry again. Never.'* This was not said dramatically. She said it quietly and with iron certainty. *'Oh Eliza, on our honeymoon, all I could think of was what you said. How you were surprised, and said, 'What? You've never even met this guy? And you're going to marry him?'*

*'Yes, I did say that,' I said. Unashamedly. I was tired of tiptoeing around a culture that so blatantly allowed change in areas that suited male and economic interests but kept women subjugated in private life. Did they really expect women being trained for leadership to sit back and meekly accept a husband they'd never met?*

*'And you're right. If I'd just met him once, just for five minutes, I would've known. That's all it took. And I knew. He's a bad man. My family, how could they do this to me? How could they marry me to a man like this?'*

*Rasha was close to tears. 'But I tell you one thing. This will not happen to my younger sisters. I made my family promise that they will meet their husbands first. As for me, I will never marry again.'* (Rumney, 2012, p. 184)

It is a contentious situation in which there are no easy answers for those working across cultures and making, and acting upon, value and ethical judgements every day. Eliza could be judged by readers for being ethnocentric or imperialist for imposing her western values upon another culture. On the other hand, she could also be upholding universal human rights of women as they relate to self-determination, human dignity and a broad cross-cultural consensus on what constitutes terrible human suffering that is unarguably wrong. However, as long as Eliza admits to her ethnocentrism, Renteln would argue that it is acceptable for her to criticize another cultural practise in this way.

Renteln is joined in her critique of extreme cultural relativism through critical examination of the roles of enculturation and ethnocentrism, the legitimacy to critique and even intervene across cultures, and in her belief in the possibility of cross-cultural universals by philosopher Martha Nussbaum who focuses her argument on how cultural relativism impinges on the human development of women. Nussbaum lists a vast number of reasons such as less access than men to education and employment, and greater vulnerability to physical and sexual violence, for the 'unequal social and political circumstances [that] give women unequal human capabilities' (2000, p. 1). To redress this inequality, she seeks through overlapping consensus among people to provide a universal list of 'central human functional capabilities' that can, more so than human rights, measure what 'people are actually able to do and to be' in ways informed by 'the intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being' (2000, p. 5), respect for people as separate ends and the preconditions of liberty and self-determination (2000, p. 59).

Defining cultural relativism as 'the idea ... that normative criteria must come from within the society to which they are applied,' Nussbaum points out the contradiction in this assertion by stating that '[p]eople are resourceful borrowers of ideas' (2000, p. 48) and that 'normative relativism is self-subverting: for, in asking us to defer to local norms, it asks us to defer to norms that in most cases are strongly nonrelativistic' (2000, p. 49). In other words, Nussbaum is pointing out the futility of applying relativity to cultural customs if relativity is solely based on the same normative criteria from which the customs arose. Furthermore, she argues, like Renteln who questions the extent to which relativists must tolerate intolerance, that many people confuse relativism with tolerance and respect for others when '[m]ost cultures have exhibited considerable intolerance of diversity over the ages' (2000, p. 49).

Adhering to rigid cultural relativism by holding unconditional respect for Islamic culture proved to be a dilemma for the protagonist Eliza in my fictionalized memoir. Exhorted to behave in a manner that reflects her 'understanding of the culture of the Islamic peoples', despite being treated by the Moslem project manager in a manner that showed very little respect for her, and indeed contravened Islamic norms by subletting her apartment to a man, Eliza comments that:

*despite extreme provocation and gross cultural insensitivity towards me by [the project manager] Shazhad, my behaviour had remained unflinchingly professional, polite and culturally sensitive at all times. I was getting tired of*

*showing respect for a culture that seemed to have very little respect for me as a woman. (Rumney, 2012, p. 114)*

While Eliza understands the need for cultural sensitivity and respect when living in a Moslem country, she is angry about being targeted for corruption because of her perceived vulnerability as a single female and begins to question why her cultural respect is not being reciprocated when under Islam men are supposed to protect the honour of women.

Nussbaum counters any charges that her universal capabilities approach is anti-diversity by arguing that ‘cultures are dynamic and full of contestation’ and as ‘some traditional practices are harmful and evil, and some actively hostile to the other elements of a diverse culture, we are forced by our interest in diversity itself to develop a set of criteria against which to assess the practices we find, asking which are acceptable and worth preserving, and which are not’ (2000, p. 59). In other words, she believes it is acceptable to use a universal set of criteria to criticize the unjust practises of any culture in order to preserve diversity within that culture. While Nussbaum supports much latitude for diversity in general, she also believes that with very strong reason, involving assessment of the contribution versus the harm they do, that it is better to let some cultural customs die out (2000, pp. 50-51).

Nussbaum admits that her enterprise is ‘fraught with peril, both intellectual and political’ and questions whether it could be interpreted as ‘simply one more exercise in colonial or class domination’ (2000, p. 35). And indeed, Gayatri Spivak, in an effort to disassociate herself from any ‘scary superficial similarity’ (2004, p. 568) between her own views and those of Nussbaum, argues that Nussbaum’s work ‘remains on the metropolitan side of the undergirding discontinuity of which I speak [between the subaltern and the elite]’ (2004, p. 566). She asserts that Nussbaum’s ‘informants, even when seemingly subaltern, are mediated for her by the domestic “below,” *the descendents of the colonial subject, the morally outraged top-drawer activist*’ (2004, p. 566) in contrast to Spivak herself, whose own ‘teacher is the subaltern,’ (2004, p. 568) whom she defines as people who have ‘limited or no access to the cultural imperialism’ and occupy ‘a space of difference’ (de Kock, 1992, p. 45). I would argue that Nussbaum appears to be following Renteln’s directive that there is nothing to prevent relativists from critiquing or passing comment on the activities or beliefs of other cultures **as long as they acknowledge** that this criticism is based upon their own ethnocentric beliefs and that it may constitute some form of cultural

imperialism. Spivak, on the other hand, might have access to the subaltern but she does not provide an explanation here on how the vast power and class differential between herself and the subaltern may be bridged nor how this may impact upon her own right to pass comment on the subaltern's beliefs or activities.

Accusations of colonial and class domination have also been levelled at Susan Okin who holds the more radical view that it might be best for, not just some cultural practices, but for whole cultures to become extinct so that its members could be integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture (1999, p. 22). She has been criticized by academics such as Cynthia Kaufman who describes her claim as 'surprisingly insensitive' and her title to be 'outrageous' (2002, pp. 228-229). It would appear that Okin has set out to be deliberately provocative as her essay is titled 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?' when it is clear that she is not arguing against multiculturalism in general but against state-sanctioned minority cultural rights that impinge upon the rights of women within that minority culture and contravene the civil and human rights enjoyed by women in the majority culture. Her essay challenges Will Kylicka's assertion that because culture plays such a fundamental role in providing meaningful ways of life, and because some minority cultures are threatened with extinction, minority cultures should be protected by special rights (1999, p. 11).

Underpinning her essay is Okin's belief that 'women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and a freely chosen lives as men can' (1999, p. 10). Highlighting the effects of acculturation on women, Okin summarizes her essay as follows:

*I argue that many cultures oppress some of their members, in particular women, and that they often are able to socialize these oppressed members so that they accept, without question, their designated cultural status. I argue, therefore, that in the context of liberal states, when cultural or religious groups claim special rights – whether to be exercised by them together as a group or individually as members of that group – attention should be paid to the status of women within the culture or religion. This means that it is not enough for those representing the liberal state simply to listen to the requests of self-styled group leaders. They must inquire into the point of view of the women, and to take especially seriously the perspective of the younger women. (1999, p. 117)*

Despite the apparent contradiction in her above summary - that the point of view of women, who have often been acculturated into accepting without question their designated and oppressed cultural status would, therefore, necessarily differ from the point of view of the self-styled group leaders, presumably elder males - Okin seems to be arguing, like Nussbaum, that traditional cultures are not static, unchanging or uncontested. For Okin, contestation would seem to lie with the young women, such as Rasha in my fictionalized memoir, in traditional cultures where 'discrimination against and control of the freedom of females are practiced, to a greater or lesser extent, by virtually all cultures, past and present, but especially by religious ones and those that look to the past - to ancient texts or revered traditions - for guidelines or rules about how to live in the contemporary world' (1999, p. 21). This quotation points to how both racism and sexism can work against women in minority cultures. From a western perspective, sexism is identified in discriminatory practices such as men controlling the freedom of women in traditional cultures. From an eastern perspective, racism is apparent in what Ayaan Hirsi Ali refers to as the western tendency to adopt the well-intentioned but cruel 'racism of low expectations' (2010b, p. xviii) in its tolerance of traditional practices that discriminate against women. Yael Tamir describes this western view as 'paternalism ... embedded in the assumption that while "we" can survive change and innovation and endure the tensions created by modernity, "they" cannot ... [and] must adhere to known cultural patterns' (cited in Okin, 1999, p. 51). In this way, the west can underestimate and discriminate against women in traditional cultures by not only assuming that these women do not desire any change in their lives but that they lack the resilience to successfully adapt to change.

In summary, I am challenging the rigid cultural relativist belief that different cultural practices are not good or bad, right or wrong, just different. Following arguments from Renteln, Bidney, Ignatieff and Nussbaum, I assert that some cultural practices, particularly those that apply solely to women, **are** insufferably wrong and that cross-cultural consensus could be found to support this. I believe that criticism of cultural practices from both inside and outside the culture can be constructive, not racist, **as long as** those commenting from outside the culture acknowledge that ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism may form the basis of their criticism. This summary now begs the question: If cross-cultural criticism is deemed acceptable

under certain conditions, can it be acceptable for a white western woman to represent the Other, particularly if it involves protecting the human rights of women?

The responses to Okin's essay have been organized into a book, with the same title as that of the essay, edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard and Martha Nussbaum. Many of the critiques and counter-arguments in this book centre on the legitimacy of representing the Other. Given that I elected to write my fictionalized memoir in resistance to what I see as a standard blueprint for white western female memoirists – that, in order to avoid charges of racism, neo-imperialism and western bias, they should exercise rigid cultural relativism expressed as hyper-cultural sensitivity and deference with an accompanying denigration of western culture; that in order to avoid charges of appropriation of the Other's story, they should avoid or only briefly engage in any negative commentary on the other culture in relation to violation of the human rights of local women - I will now examine the contentious issue of the legitimacy of representing the Other.

## **The Politics of Representation: The Legitimacy to Write on Behalf of Others**

The debate on who is qualified to write about the Other with authority and accuracy, and without bias, projection and prejudice, is fraught with complexity, often characterized by heated disputes over semantics and people talking past each other. I have identified four main arguments pertinent to this essay. The first argument explores the view that people from a majority or western culture have no right to speak on behalf of people in a minority or developing culture. In contrast, the second argument recommends candour and even a collision of different opinions about a given culture from inside and outside that culture. The third argument explores through literature whether the legitimacy to speak about or on behalf of others can be acquired through violent embodied experience. The fourth argument examines issues of human rights and acculturation in terms of the legitimacy to comment on other cultures or to speak on behalf of others.

The first argument – that people from a majority or western culture have no right to speak on behalf of people in a minority or developing culture – is broadly derived from Edward Said's critique of Orientalist scholars. Strongly influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and by Michel Foucault's ideas on the interplay of 'truth' and power in an hegemonic relationship established not by coercion nor by consent but by the infiltration of minds and bodies through certain practices and methods, Said (cited in Nader, 1989, p. 324) describes Orientalism as a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' by 'making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it ...an accepted grid for filtering the Orient into Western consciousness' (Nader, 1989, p. 326). As a result, many academics argue that, due to the tendency for white western women to 'collapse differences among women' (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 2) by ignoring the fact that women of colour are 'triplely oppressed by their race, class and gender' (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 46), it follows that the white western woman has limited right or no right at all to speak on behalf of women from other cultures. For these reasons, Sander Gilman in his reply to Okin's essay, states that '[t]he very claim that Western (or Westernized), bourgeois (and, yes, white) women can speak for all women was



exploded in discussions within and beyond the United Nations meeting on the status of women held at Nairobi more than a decade ago' (1999, p. 55).

The tendency for many white feminists to '[overemphasize] gender oppression as overriding other socioeconomic characteristics as the basis for subordination' (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 2) is supported by Nira Yuval-Davis' powerful description of the intersectionality or multiple oppressions faced by women of colour:

*... Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group ... tries to navigate the main crossing in the city ... The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street ... She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Patel cited in Yuval-Davis, 2007, p. 565)*

It would appear that for some white western writers and academics who have an understanding of this intersectionality or many layered oppression faced by women of color, writing about, or on behalf of, a minority culture is a daunting prospect. For example, at the Perth Writers' Festival in 2010, author Liz Byrski admitted that she would be 'terrified' of writing about an Indigenous character and 'getting it wrong' (Byrski, 2010). She did not elaborate and one can only assume that she was concerned about reinforcing stereotypes and/or being criticized or even charged with accusations of racism.

Fear of being accused of racism is apparent in the work of some white western memoirists such as Maureen Helen who worked as a remote area nurse at an Indigenous community in Western Australia. In an early chapter, she describes the unhygienic state of the bathroom and toilet after use by her Indigenous patients and towards the end of the memoir comments that:

*While I worked at Jigalong, I became increasingly conscious that my attempt to impose my previously strongly-held Western ideals about health care in such a situation contributed to maintaining or reinforcing the relationships of colonisation. It was, simply, impertinence ... a form of racism.' (2006, p. 313)*

It is possible that this statement is overly self-conscious – as though Helen is following a standard blueprint for white western memoirists through exercising rigid cultural relativism expressed as hyper-cultural sensitivity and deference with an accompanying denigration of western culture. Helen is obviously loathe to impose

western standards of health care or hygiene upon her Indigenous patients despite the likelihood of favourable health outcomes in terms of preventing transmission of infectious disease. It could be argued that this attitude, in its strict observance of cultural relativism, is in fact a dereliction of duty that would not have been neglected in a white Australian community. It serves as an example of what Ayaan Hirsi Ali refers to as the well-intentioned but cruel ‘racism of low expectations ...creating the illusion that one can hold on to tribal norms and at the same time become a successful citizen’ (2010b, p. xviii). It is ironic that Ali would possibly agree with Helen’s self-accusation of racism though for a different reason. While Helen believes her racism stems from cultural imperialism, Ali would describe it as racism of low expectations or a belief that Indigenous people are not capable of maintaining standards of hygiene conducive to good health.

In my fictionalized memoir, while strongly aware of the perils of western cultural imperialism, faced by the competing concept of self-determination for women, the protagonist Eliza came to the conclusion that sometimes following a western model, when freely chosen by the participant, in this case newly divorced Rasha, can be beneficial:

*‘Please help me, Eliza. I applied last year and was not accepted. The university, my lecturers, they say I’m not assertive enough, that I don’t have enough leadership qualities to do this MBA.’*

*I looked down at the application form, scanning for loopholes, anything that could bump her over the requisite score required for admittance. There had to be a way around this low score on personal qualities that was keeping her out of an MBA program in the UK. Ah, there’s space for a written comment by her current supervisor. Yep, that would be me. If I write it up in a way that turns this negative into a positive we might just swing it ...Yes, the UK and an MBA. Financial independence. Maybe, sometimes, west is best. (Runney, 2012, p. 185)*

It could be argued that Eliza’s belief that ‘west is best’ in this situation may arise from ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism and that she has no right to intervene in the life of Rasha in a way that contravenes her cultural norms, even if asked to do so. However, Bidney’s counter-argument that under extreme circumstances, ‘relativists may decide that criticism and even intervention are lesser evils than either ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism’ (cited in Renteln, 1990, p. 77), and

Nussbaum's recommendation of self-determination as a universal human capability, could also apply here. This creates yet another soul-searching, cross-cultural dilemma for Eliza where the rigid application of cultural relativism would be so much easier than holding a simultaneity of views and being forced to choose just one course of action.

Commenting on the perception that representation is only legitimate if both writer and subject are strictly equal in terms of age, status, race and gender, Caitlin Harrison, in her position as both activist and academic, refers to 'absurdist limits [resulting in] three-month-old Bangladeshi baby girls being able to be represented only by other three-month-old baby girls' (2009, p. 24). But even representation involving parity would have its perils according to Stephanie Watts who writes that '[i]f the writer is a part of an ethnic or minority group, the writer has the added worry of misrepresenting a race or people by reinforcing misperceptions and stereotypes (2005, p. 90). The following comment about acid burning from female Bangladeshi academic, Anwar Begum, elicited from personal correspondence with Caitlin Harrison, illustrates this worry:

*There is a particular violence in Bangladesh, it's heinous. But I don't think there is any need to highlight it too much ...and draw attention to it, especially foreign attention to it ...Bangladeshi men should not be condemned. That weird and strange crime [acid burning], do you think it represents a society?' (cited in Harrison, 2009, p. 77).*

Lack of representation for acid burn victims by their middle-class sisters who fear reinforcing misperceptions of their society and Susan Ash's concern that this 'strong fear about getting things wrong is leading some of us to the point of paralysis' (1993, p. 7) feeds into my own concern that rigid cultural relativism, playing out as hyper-cultural sensitivity and restrictions on the legitimacy of those who can represent others, can lead to inaction that undermines the human and civil rights of women. This concern is highlighted in the fictionalized memoir when Eliza agonizes over whether she is being compliant in allowing men from minority cultures get away with sexual crimes (and violence) against women. Surely it could be argued that in any culture acid burning constitutes human misery that is insufferably, unarguably wrong? Surely, in this case, with silence and inaction on the part of many middle-class Bangladeshi female academics, it could also be argued, as Bidney does, that western

criticism and intervention [by a white woman] on behalf of the voiceless [Bangladeshi acid burn survivors] is a lesser evil than ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism?

The fraught and multi-faceted nature of this kind of debate is exemplified in the ongoing debates and discussions on the veiling of Moslem women particularly after the ban on face veiling in France. For example, western feminist Naomi Wolfe marries cultural relativism and postfeminism to rebrand a woman's choice to veil as 'a recognizably Western feminist set of feelings' and 'not necessarily a sign of her repression' and argues that many veiled Moslem women 'felt liberated from what they experienced as the intrusive, commodifying, basely sexualising Western gaze (2008, p. 1). In contrast, a Moslem female victim of harassment said that she had 'taken on the full-face veil to stave off the hassle' from local Moslem men (el Deeb, 2009). Meanwhile, Moslem feminist Mona Eltahawy firmly writes 'I am a Muslim, I am a feminist and I detest the full-body veil known as a niqab or burqa' (2009, p. 1) and Moslem memoirist, Qanta Ahmed, contests the notion of *choice* in her scathing attack upon veiling:

*This veiling is anathema to me. Even with a deep understanding of Islam, I could not imagine mummification is what an enlightened merciful God would ever have wished for half of all His creation ... while these veils conceal women, at the same time they expose the rampant, male oppression which is their jailor. Polyester imprisonment by compulsion is ungodly and (like the fiber) distinctly man-made. (2008, p. 29)*

It is interesting to note the variety of view points on postfeminist notions of empowerment in this issue: while Ahmed and Eltahawy both see veiling as detestable in terms of the oppression of women, Wolfe and many Moslem women regard the veil as a matter of choice delivering empowerment through liberation from the male gaze of both Moslem and western men.

As a white western woman who has lived for over five years in Islamic countries, stayed with Shi'ite Moslem relatives in India and travelled alone through much of the Arab Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia, my attitude towards face-veiling remains troubled. I have worn several varieties of female Islamic dress such as the Indian salwar kameez, Malay baju sarong and Arabic abaya, often with a head scarf and occasionally with the full face-covering burqa, in order to stave off hassle from local Moslem men. I found that the advantages were offset by the disadvantages. For me, wearing the burqa was both debilitating and dangerous. I suffered from dehydration

due to the sauna-like conditions created by wearing black nylon in forty-five degree celsius heat and had difficulty negotiating traffic due to the lack of peripheral vision. My ongoing unease at seeing veiled women has been demonstrated in a previous excerpt from my fictionalized memoir where Eliza uses humour to disguise her troubled feelings about veiling. The longer Eliza lived in an Arab Gulf State the more she covered her body in order to stave off the male gaze. In that culture she understood the need for covering but questioned those aspects of a culture that decreed a woman's clothing and movement should be restrictive in order to prevent men from behaving lewdly. It seemed glaringly unfair on women, and the unrelenting nature of the harassment was draining, as Eliza points out in the fictionalized memoir:

*Maybe it is time to speak the unspeakable, to admit what no one wants to say out loud. That Lonely Planet is wrong. These are not issues that can be brushed off with 'a sense of humour.' The ugly truth is that women cannot move easily wherever they like. In vast areas of this world women have no right to be in public places unless veiled or chaperoned. If alone, unaccompanied and uncovered, we are considered 'raw meat' left outside for men, both eastern and western, to come prowling around. Maybe it was time to admit defeat and go home back to the haven of my little house on poles, to the solitude of my caramel dune. (Rumney, 2012, p. 167)*

Despite my determination to resist the powerful discourse of rigid cultural relativism, I was still acutely aware of Eliza's status as white western woman and her tenuous legitimacy to comment on a culture not her own, despite some experience of it, and so, in the fictionalized memoir, I chose my words carefully, tempered the tone and endeavoured to be even-handed when commenting on the burqa and other aspects of Islamic culture.

In contrast, Canadian Moslem Irshad Manji, secure in her legitimacy in standing at the intersection of east and west, is extremely candid in her critique of Islam and exposing any hypocrisy she sees within the practice of the religion. In her book, *The Trouble with Islam*, she begins with the statement 'I have to be honest with you. Islam is on very thin ice with me' (Manji, 2003, p. 1) and asks 'What's with the stubborn streak of anti-semitism in Islam? Who is the real colonizer of Muslims – America or Arabia? Why are we squandering the talents of women, fully half of God's creations?' (2003, p. 2) and urges that 'we've got to end Islam's totalitarianism, particularly the gross human rights violations against women and religious minorities' (2003, p.3).

Challenging Edward Said's 'Orientalism' and the 'West's supposed tendency to colonize Muslims by demonizing them as exotic freaks of the East,' she believes the academic worship of Said 'effectively stifled other ideas about Islam' and that these western 'acolytes stood ready to denounce as "Orientalist" (read: racist) just about anything that affronted mainstream Muslims' (2003, p. 21). Despite agreeing to some extent with some of Manji's observations about Islam, due to the powerful discourse of cultural relativism that swirls around me, even in a fictionalized memoir, I would not contemplate writing with such candour as a white western woman about Islam despite my own, albeit limited, legitimacy in standing at the intersection of east and west.

The second argument I wish to present on the legitimacy to speak on behalf of others recommends candour and even a collision of different opinions from inside and outside a given culture. Gayatri Spivak refutes 'the tired nationalist claim that only a native can paint the scene,' and argues that '[c]ultural continuity, made possible by cultural change, is assured by cultural explanations, coming from all sides, insiders and outsiders, rulers and ruled ... [c]ulture is a place where different explanations always collide, not just by races and classes, but by genders and generations' (2006, p. 360). However, alongside these claims that cultural comment is available to all, Spivak repeatedly refers to, and gives examples of, the obstacles to empowering women caused by entrenched class differences in India and warns that the 'academy is a place of upward class mobility, and this internal cultural difference is related to the dynamics of class difference' (2006, p. 359). She uses this argument to critique Nussbaum's engagement with elitist or top drawer activists in India implying that Nussbaum's own middle-class status, and the middle or upper class subjects she chooses to interview, do not enable accurate representation of marginalized women in India.

As an example of how academics can talk past each other on this issue, it is interesting to note that Nussbaum uses the same argument to justify her legitimacy to write about poor or marginalized women in India. Acknowledging her status as both foreigner and middle-class, she nevertheless argues that:

*Most Indian scholarship about India is also the work of foreigners in at least some sense, that is, people who live middle-class lives that are not remotely like the lives about which they write ... [m]aybe at times a foreigner can maintain, too, a helpful kind of neutrality amid the cultural, religious, and political*

*debates in which any scholar living in India is bound to be enmeshed. (2000, p. 10)*

In other words, Nussbaum believes that Spivak's middle-class status, without the impartiality provided by someone outside the culture, is a greater impediment to faithfully engaging with marginalised Indian women than her own middle-class and advantageously foreign status.

These arguments introduce another layer in the controversial debate on who is qualified to write about the Other: the apparent friction and disconnection between the academy and activists or those who work in the field. Philosopher Bryan Turner acknowledges this disconnection between elitist groups and those on the ground when he states that 'the elite, in the comfort of their Beverley Hills mansions, can afford to be generous to other cultures at a safe distance, whereas the slum dwellers of Bradford and Glasgow cannot' (2002, p. 61). Nussbaum comments that '[s]ome feminist philosophy ... has involved a type of abstraction that turns the mind away from reality, and that does not help us see or understand real women's lives better' (2000, p. 11) and that sometimes for an academic outside of the culture 'traditions could look beautiful, since she never had to live in the world they constructed' (2000, p. 46). In other words, Hollywood directors and academics, at a geographical and social distance from their subjects, can adopt a more sentimental or romantic view of traditional cultures than people who interact on a daily basis with people who practice traditional customs and possibly have a more grounded understanding of these cultures.

The above arguments are strongly supported by activist Caitlin Harrison who worked with survivors of acid attacks in Bangladesh. While acutely aware of her status as 'a Western researcher representing Eastern women' and the necessity 'to investigate the vexed issue of the legitimacy of representing the "Other"' (2009, p. 10), Harrison deliberately chose to interview activists for her research prior to academics because she 'found that some [Bangladeshi] academics had not spent time in the slums or with the women facing the issues that the academics write and theorize about' (2009, p. 14). Her findings parallel Spivak's observation that in India a major obstacle to empowering women is an entrenched class system where the academic elite live vastly different lives to the marginalised sisters they represent.

Sometimes the disconnection exists between activists themselves creating new hierarchies of those claiming to have the legitimacy to speak on behalf of others. An

example of the disconnection between Indigenous city and bush activists was recently played out in a variety of media in Australia and highlights the often heated nature of the debate. When high profile Indigenous lawyer, Larissa Behrendt tweeted that watching bestiality on television was ‘less offensive’ (Karvelas, 2011, p. 1) than watching Bess Price, an Aboriginal woman who supports the federal intervention in Northern Territory communities, it sparked outrage amongst Indigenous leaders. Academic Marcia Langton commented:

*She is an example of the wide cultural, moral and increasingly political rift between urban, left-wing, activist Aboriginal women and the bush women, who witness the horrors of life in their communities, much of which is arrogantly denied by the former. The Twitter messages reveal a repulsive hatred of everything that Bess stands for: the rights of Aboriginal women in remote communities to be protected from sexual abuse and violence and to be supported to take up opportunities for themselves and their children. (Karvelas, 2011, p. 1)*

Spivak is also concerned about the deep rift in terms of understanding and experience between academic elites and women who are poor and marginalized. Although she believes that everyone has the right to comment on other cultures, and that indeed this is necessary for the continuation of the culture, she stresses that the possible classist or elitist nature of the commentary must be appreciated, and that, above all, the most important source of information, or teacher, is the subaltern. Consequently, Spivak’s directive to first world academics is to ‘de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other...’ (cited in Ash, 1993, p. 5). It is interesting to note that Spivak does not explain how she herself has been able to de-hegemonize her own position as an elitist academic nor does she give directions to first world academics on how they could do it. Nussbaum claims to have experienced ‘warm and trusting receptions’ in working-class homes in India (2000, p. 10) but Spivak comments that she has little to learn from Nussbaum (2004, p. 568) intimating that it takes much more than cosy chats to learn how to occupy the subject position of Others. By spending time, indeed in sharing a bed with an acid attack survivor, and by consulting with both academics and activists, has Harrison managed to learn how to occupy the subject position of an acid burn survivor?

This begs the question: by what means can a white western woman, or even an upper-class Indian woman such Spivak, de-hegemonize her position in order to learn



how to occupy the subject position of the Other? Can it be achieved through imaginative empathy? Marguerite La Caze, T. Minh-ha Trinh and Luce Irigaray all contend that it is impossible to occupy the subject position of the Other but argue that a limited means of understanding or empathy can be achieved through imagination, respect, love, reciprocity and delicacy. For example, La Caze suggests that an imaginative response to the Other can be cultivated through the passions of generosity for exploring similarities and wonder in exploring difference (2002, p. 6). Trinh adds another necessary quality by arguing that infinite delicacy would be required to connect across the space of different subjectivities (1989, p. 38) and Irigaray emphasizes the application of respect and love to achieve a reciprocity that does not seek to appropriate the experiences of another: 'I don't dominate or consume you. I respect you (as irreducible)' (1995, p. 171). Meanwhile, Bryan Turner argues that the vulnerability of the human body can provide a starting point for commonality (2002, p. 56). If, as these academics suggest, personal qualities such as empathy, imagination and cultural sensitivity can only provide the white western woman with a limited understanding of the subject position of the Other, what kind of embodied experience arising from vulnerability can provide more than just the starting point for commonality suggested by Turner? This leads to another question: Can greater empathetic understanding, or even a fleeting ability to occupy the subject position of the Other, be obtained by the white western woman through a violently embodied experience?

To explore the third argument - whether the legitimacy to speak about or on behalf of others can be acquired through violent embodied experience - I will turn to literature, specifically Gail Jones' short story (or scenario) *Veronica* about a white western woman, Elizabeth, who 'with the smugness of a conqueror' (1992, p. 85) sets out 'to repose in first world sovereignty, to enjoy what she sees for its souvenirs and its spectacle' (1992, p. 86) but discovers that her white western privilege fails to prevent rape by an Indian man. After this experience, Elizabeth changes: 'Her skin has become caramel, her clothing a sari' and the story ends with the narrator stating: 'But I see her there lying upon her bed ... becoming explorative, becoming other, almost becoming, one might say - with all the fraught politics of race in attendant complication - almost becoming Indian' (1992, pp. 92-93). Consequently, it would appear that Jones supports the contention of La Caze, Trinh and Irigaray, that despite trauma, a white western woman, while able to stretch to the limits of self, cannot **fully**

occupy the subject position of the Other. However, it is also possible that the use of overly cautious language such as ‘one might say,’ Jones is being ironic and passing comment on the fraught politics of race in attendant complication when writing as a white western woman about the Other.

Having travelled alone in India, I am able to recognize on some levels the imperialistic portrayal of the solo white female traveller as represented by Elizabeth but query, as Jones is possibly doing, the constant foregrounding of white western privilege over vulnerability as a woman travelling alone, and reject the suggestion, however faint, that perhaps her rape invites less empathy because of her initial smugness. Consequently, I agree with Budroodin (and possibly Jones) who questions whether the rape of Elizabeth should be construed as a learning experience or as the price a white woman must pay in order to identify with her native sister (1997, pp. 9-11). If this is the case, I argue that the price is too high and would appear punitive, as possibly some form of payback for the wrongs of the imperialist past. If indeed Jones is making an ironic point about the politics of race, it is interesting to note that Budroodin also argues that the conflation of rape victim and Indian woman in ‘a text like *Veronica* constructs Indian women as helpless victims and thus collaborates ideologically in the discourse of imperialism’ (1997, p. 11). This counter-argument serves to illustrate the fraught nature of the swirling discourses around sex, race and post-colonialism and how even well-intentioned narratives with seemingly anti-imperialist sentiments can be re-interpreted as imperialist.

The complex interplay of sex, race and class in power relations in a post-colonial nation, and the perils of writing about such themes, are examined in greater depth in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, and in its literary critiques. In this novel, Coetzee writes with ‘terrible honesty’ (Eagleton, 2001, p. 2) about post-apartheid South Africa, and in doing so, explores the contentious themes of black-on-white, male-on-female rape, and the requisite silence of the white woman as expiation for the sins of the apartheid regime. In the novel, white woman Lucy Lurie is gang-raped by a group of black men. She refuses to lay charges against her rapists and, in order to adapt to the new South African order and remain on her land, she proposes to gain protection from further rape by marrying her black tenant, Petrus. Her father, David Lurie, is exasperated by her attitude and tries to dissuade her:

*‘How humiliating,’ he says finally. ‘Such high hopes, and to end like this.’*

*'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing ... No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'*

*'Like a dog.'*

*'Yes, like a dog.'* (1999, p. 205)

Later Lucy explains why she has not laid charges against her rapists:

*'The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.'*

*'This place being what?'*

*'This place being South Africa.'*

*'I don't agree ... Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?'* (1999, p. 112)

According to Elleke Boehmer, Lucy is seeking to 'accommodate a history of violation through a traditionally feminine physical abjection to, and new responsibility for, that history' (Boehmer, 2002, p. 343). As such, she 'embeds in herself, her body, the stereotype of the wronged and muted woman, the abused and to-be-again-abused of history' (2002, p. 134) and as this body 'she is the non-introspective arbiter of what it is to live the truth of the new South Africa ... the price of staying on for a woman (black or white), the surrender, without significant change to traditional forms of subjection, servility, and abnegation' (2002, p. 158). For Boehmer, the novel is a 'disappointing' assessment of post-apartheid South Africa (2002, p. 248). Challenging Michael Marais' interpretation of Lucy's passivity as a means to suspend the cycle of domination and counter-domination, Boehmer asks 'In relation to the gendered binary of oppressor and oppressed, how can this passivity be regenerative other than in the most obvious fashion?' and 'Is reconciliation with a history of violence possible if the woman – the white Lucy, or indeed the black wife of Petrus – is as ever biting her lip?' (2002, p. 350). For me, the non-introspective nature of Lucy's surrender – her passive acceptance that racism should be privileged over sexism or acts of sexual violence towards women - is disturbing. Equally disturbing is the suggestion arising from these arguments that only the oppression of

men is an issue that requires international condemnation or intervention and that somehow the oppression of women is a normality that does not require censure, examination or action.

Given that most rape in South Africa is black-on-black, male-on-female, it is interesting to note Boehmer collapses racial difference and refers to women in general, black and white, as equal victims of subjection in post-colonial South Africa. Mary Eagleton provides a more nuanced response, and one that more accurately reflects my understanding of Coetzee's intention in his portrayal of Lucy, when she refers to the ethical dilemmas she faced as a white woman reading *Disgrace* and admits to being 'bothered by the silence' of Lucy while simultaneously acknowledging the 'historical power' of white women and their implication 'in the legacies and responsibilities the [story] suggests' (2001, p. 191). For Eagleton the dilemma lies in the suggestion that the silence of the white woman might be a 'condition for political progress' to prevent the re-ignition of a 'racist legacy' versus the notion that if 'the story of black-on-white rape is not told, the silence that surrounds the history of sexual violence, a history as pernicious as that of race, is compounded' (2001, p. 191). Referring to 'situations of competing rights,' Eagleton comments on the 'impossibility of ever identifying equitably' (2001, p. 192) but for me it appears that Coetzee is identifying more empathetically with the plight of vulnerable women in general, both black and white, and their right to live without fear of sexual predation by men. It is my contention that Coetzee has elected to write fearlessly and honestly about the shifting power structures in post-apartheid South Africa that expose how sexual aggression and vulnerability are not specific to one race and chooses to do so fully aware of the charges of racism and playing into the mythology that white women are at sexual risk from black men that will follow.

The terrible honesty in *Disgrace* has brought accusations of racism and, according to Radebe, Coetzee 'represents as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man' (cited in Graham, 2003, p. 435). However, as Lucy Valerie Graham points out, while 'black peril representations' play into a 'history where rape narratives have been deployed for racist ends' (2003, p. 434) to stir up white hysteria and 'obscure the fact that most rapes in South Africa are intraracial' (2003, p. 435), it is possible to argue that Coetzee also presents a subversion of the 'black peril' – the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men – through Lurie's sexual predation of his student Melanie. Thus, the boundaries of identity

between black and white men become unclear when white academic Lurie is also portrayed as a rapist and dog killer, though in different ways, to the black men who rape Lucy and kill her dogs (Graham, 2003, p. 443). The blurring of boundaries is also evident when Lucy, referring to the hatred she felt from her rapists, says to her father, 'Hatred ... When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know' (Coetzee, 1999, p. 158). For me, it is this statement that most strongly suggests Coetzee, in terms of competing rights, is more concerned with issues of sexism, particularly sexual violence against women, than issues of racism in *Disgrace*.

Budroodin also foregrounds issues of sexism over racism when she states, '[r]ape is not restricted to a particular race, rather it is indicative of a larger landscape of brute reality which transcends questions of race and identity' (1997, p. 18). I would add that the play of power adds another dimension to the issue. As Sue Kossew comments, 'Lucy's rape on her farm by three black men is ... the exercise of power by those who have it over those who do not' (2003, p. 156). Like Budroodin, South African reporter and rape-survivor, Charlene Smith also points to a landscape of brute reality in her claim that 'rape is endemic in South African culture' (Graham, 2003, p. 434). She further claims that the 'role of traditions and religions in fostering a culture of rape needed to be understood' (Graham, 2003, p. 434) for which she was accused of being deeply racist by the South African President, Thabo Mbeki, who denied that sexual violence in South Africa constituted a serious problem. It is not clear whether Mbeki was denying the high incidence of sexual violence or whether he denied sexual violence was in itself a serious crime. It is possible that his objections relate to a colonial history where 'black peril' narratives were used for racist reasons (Graham, 2003, p. 434).

One could argue that it is not just in post-apartheid, post-colonial and developing countries such as South Africa where sexual violence is not considered a serious problem. Joanne Bourke states that only five per cent of rapes in the United Kingdom reported to the police end in conviction (2007, p. 389) and that 'a startling 91 per cent of women failed to report their abuse' (2007, p. 394) indicating a culture of silence around the crime. Her finding that jurors, particularly women, prove to be exceptionally reluctant to find a man guilty of rape unless there are aggravating circumstances (2007, p. 394) leads to her conclusion that 'unless there is evidence of

physical violence, rape remains tolerated before the law' (2007, p. 404). Interpreted another way – that is, a staggering 95% of alleged rapists walk free from court, a staggering 91% of women fail to report their rape and women, in particular, are extremely adverse to convicting a man of rape, it could be argued that rape is tolerated not only before the law but by society in general. Perhaps this situation could also be described as landscape of brute reality.

At risk of feeding into stereotypes of the sexually violent African-American men, another contentious element to this already complex discussion on inter-racial rape, power and silence is Bourke's observation that a disproportionate number of rapists in American gaols are African-Americans while the victims are disproportionately white. The chief reason she gives for this relates to power, oppression and notions of masculinity. The African-Americans can 'take revenge upon one symbol of their oppression' (2007, p. 344) and, according to one black prisoner, it is 'a way for the black man to get back at the white man. It's one way he can assert his manhood ... he can show he's a man by making the white guy into a girl' (2007, p. 344). This phenomenon ties in with Hurtado's belief, and what I believe Coetzee is trying to portray in his novel, that "we are all potentially in the oppressor category, because whether we have power over others varies from context to context and is primarily determined by race, class and gender (1996, p. 124). In the context of a prison where both black and white male prison rapists are considered the 'epitome of manliness' and tend to refer to their victims as 'queer' or 'girls' (Bourke, 2007, p. 348), I find the implications of this behaviour to be alarming. It suggests that empowerment and manhood for some men can be achieved through the rape of a girl and, for some black rapists, revenge against white men can be achieved by making the white guy into a girl through the act of rape. When women are reduced into what Bourke refers to as 'rape space' (2007, p. 431) or pawns to be used in the power games of power and revenge between black and white men, I believe that the humanity and agency of women is being erased.

Through *Disgrace*, Grant Farred explores this nuanced and complex interplay of gender, race and class on power relationships in South Africa. For Farred, rape is not merely endemic in South Africa but has become, along with violence, what he terms a 'mundanacity: an ordinary, everyday, ubiquitous, and commonplace occurrence, especially against women' that 'problematizes race relations, enabling black

acquisition and rendering white women complicit in their own subjection' (2002, p. 352). For Farred, the novel shows:

*how post-apartheid white guilt, especially when it acts as (Lucy's) self-censorship, making its redistributive peace with the past and its uncritical pact with the present, is easily appropriated by the workings of mundanacity; it is a process that normalizes itself through (white) female complicity and silence. (2002, p. 361)*

Referring to a break down of civil society in South Africa, Farred refers to the post-historical, post-literate and post-religious nature of this society and states that:

*There is one location where many forces converge: the marginalized, white, female, protagonist. It is at this intersection, in the body of Lucy, that past and present conjoin and the problematic of mundane violence articulates itself, inadvertently drawing attention to other instances of mundanacity. (2002, p. 359)*

By specifically referring to the white woman who, with her sense of post-apartheid guilt and complicit silence, becomes the easy target of violent revenge on behalf of the black man against white men, Farred could be questioning, as I do, the extent to which white women can enjoy their white western privilege.

I explore this issue in my fictionalized memoir where it could be argued that many forces also converge on the marginalized, white, female protagonist, Eliza, when she becomes the victim/survivor of drug rape by a white British man in Brunei, of corruption by her Moslem project manager and of sexual harassment and stalking by a black British man in the Gulf State. Unlike Lucy, Eliza chooses to try to overcome her vulnerability as a woman and use the agency afforded by her white western privilege to speak out. However, in Brunei, this assumed white western privilege to speak out is negated by a dual layer of oppression: she is gradually rendered voiceless by the machinations of her venal western company where profit comes before justice, **and** by Islamic law. As such it could be said that she is able to de-hegemonize her position to become subaltern to a small degree: despite having access to the cultural imperialism denied to Spivak's subaltern, she operates from a space of difference as woman and, as such, cannot obtain justice for her drug rape in an Islamic state where, as Eliza's local doctor commented, 'no one will have sympathy for a woman who drinks alcohol alone with a man' (Rumney, 2012, p. 37). With full awareness of the many layered oppression faced by black women, I still believe it is salient to point out

that, in a world portrayed by much of the media as postfeminist, white western women are not always granted white western privilege, and that the foregrounding of their gender over race and class is still very much a serious issue when working across cultures in developing countries.

The fourth argument on the legitimacy to comment on or speak on behalf of others relates to human rights, the legitimacy for intervention on the grounds of human rights, and issues of acculturation. Spivak's wry comment that 'the usual thing is to complain about the Eurocentrism of human rights' highlights ongoing criticism of Western bias embedded in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR). While claiming that she has no intention of complaining, Spivak does admit to being troubled by the use of human rights for intervention and places the 'European provenance' of human rights into the 'same category as the "enabling violation" of the production of the colonial subject' and that this 'enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated (2004, p. 523). It would appear she believes that discourses and application of human rights along Western values is a form of neo-imperialism and a contradiction in terms in that the use of human rights for intervention simultaneously bestows certain enabling rights while taking away others such as sovereignty.

Ignatieff is more strident in his criticism of Western ethnocentricity and the consequent dangers of interventionist nature of the UNDHR:

*What entitles Westerners to enforce human rights on other cultures? Nothing does. If rights are about protecting human agency, then they require us to respect the way other human beings use their agency. The argument that people in other cultures would adopt human-rights standards if they only knew what we know - and that therefore we can intervene, whether or not they want us to - is simply wrong. The idea that some people are unable to discern their own real interests is an invariable alibi of paternalism or tyranny. Victims are only victims if they say they are. The corollary is also true: we're mandated to intervene on their behalf only if other peoples and cultures ask for help.... But help means help: it doesn't mean conversion or assimilation. We've got no business inflicting our way of life upon them. Rights talk and Western culture are quite separable. (2007, p. 40)*

I believe that his argument highlights the difference between the sometimes black and white world presented by rigid cultural relativists and a more nuanced and balanced



examination of the complexities in human rights discourse in a post-colonial world provided by Spivak:

*Nevertheless, it is still disingenuous to call human rights Eurocentric, not only because, in the global South, the domestic human rights workers are, by and large, the descendents of the colonial subject, often culturally positioned against Eurocentrism, but also because, internationally, the role of the new diasporic is strong, and the diasporic in the metropolis stands for “diversity,” against Eurocentrism. (2004, p. 525)*

Spivak’s assertion that labelling human rights Eurocentric denies the agency and independent cultural stance of domestic human rights workers is supported by Nussbaum. For Nussbaum, anyone who believes that the ‘language of inalienable rights’ coming from freedom fighters or other activists in India are ‘nothing but dupes of colonial powers’ fails to understand the historical precedence of all the freedom fighters who came before them (2000, pp. 38-39). In a clear departure from Ignatieff’s assertions, Nussbaum then points out that ‘sometimes accusations of “Westernizing” are made today against those who struggle for democracy and political liberties in totalitarian societies’ (2000, p. 37) and consequently warns against ‘self-deceptive rationalizing that frequently makes us collaborators with injustice’ (2000, p. 36). In other words, it is historically inaccurate to suggest that notions of human rights and freedom from tyranny are purely a western invention and that guilt over imperialism leading to silence and paralysis can allow westerners to become compliant in allowing tyranny and oppression to flourish.

Perhaps the most significant and contestable assertion in Ignatieff’s argument against Western intervention based on human rights is that the idea that some people are unable to discern their own real interests is an invariable alibi of paternalism or tyranny. Victims are only victims if they say they are. This assertion has already been refuted in this essay by Renteln who states that cultural relativism must be reformulated in a way that acknowledges enculturation. It is also refuted by Okin who argues that many cultures are able to socialize members to accept their designated status without question. I would argue that Ignatieff’s gender blindness and the wording of his own argument can be used against him. His assertion that the idea that some people are unable to discern their own real interests is an invariable alibi of paternalism or tyranny could be read to mean the patriarchy existing **within a culture**, rather than the paternalism or tyranny imposed by imperialism. Furthermore,

Ignatieff seems to be adopting a rather simplistic view of other cultures by regarding them as static entities and not, as previously described by Nussbaum, as complex places with their own internal contestations, hegemonies and oppressions.

To further explore the above assertions, and to further develop and challenge Okin's argument that many cultures are able to socialize members to accept their designated status **without question** thereby inhibiting their agency as choosers, I will now briefly refer to Judith Butler who writes that '[t]he limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy than by the weight of the cultural institutions that have conventionally interpreted anatomy' (2004b, p. 29). Drawing upon and extending Nietzsche's claim that 'there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything,' Butler states that '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1999, p. 33). This brings up the notion of gender as an act or 'copy of a copy' (Salih, 2004, p. 93) based on discourse, seemingly without substance, with gender performances being repeated by each generation, seemingly without question. Butler is not rejecting the idea of **agency** in choosing one's gender. Instead she is suggesting that any notion of agency must be considered in terms of coercion in light of the punitive repercussions for not following one's ascribed gender script. Drawing upon Foucault's ideas on gender, Butler writes that '[o]ne chooses one's gender, but one does not choose it from a distance, which signals an ontological juncture between the choosing agent and the chosen gender' (2004b, p. 26). She believes that choice of gender is:

*not wholly conscious, but nevertheless accessible to consciousness, it is the kind of choice we make and only later realize that we have made ... taking on a gender... is a subtle and strategic project, laborious and for the most part covert ... an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. (2004b, p. 26)*

In reference to cultural sanctions, taboos and prescriptions, Butler points out that 'we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right' (2004a, p. 113) and that 'polar genders as cultural fictions' are 'alternately embodied and deflected under duress' (2004a, p. 114). This explanation does not deny agency but rather recognizes the coercion created by punitively regulated gender roles. For Nussbaum, however,

the punishment for rejecting one's gender and role can be so severe, there is no choice at all and thus that we should 'reflect before we conclude that women without options really endorse the lives they lead' (2000, p. 43). In light of these arguments, perhaps Ignatieff's statement that 'victims are only victims if they say they are' could be restated to make the claim 'victims can only say they are victims if **they have a voice** to say they are.'

To conclude this discussion, I will include a final strand of debate from Nussbaum. She adds a further dimension to the argument against Ignatieff's assertion that victims are only victims if they say they are. By referring to the philosophical 'argument from intrinsic worth,' she states that 'in general, the failure of a person to have various basic human capabilities is important in itself, not just because the person minds it or complains about it' (2000, p. 144). Perhaps this is the crux of the divide between philosophers and activists on the ground, and, academics who adhere to rigid cultural relativism: that, very simply, injustice matters regardless of gender, race, culture or historical context.

When one enters into the ferocity and complexity of the arguments around issues of human rights and the legitimacy to speak on behalf of others, it is not surprising to find that many memoirists, including myself, are reticent about touching upon these vexed issues in their memoirs. It could be argued that, for fear of accusations of racism such as those directed at Coetzee, some memoirists follow a rigid but safe cultural relativism, restrict any critique of culture to their own or even practice cultural reversal like Cate Kennedy. Helen Garner, described by Jason Steger as a 'fearless writer ...[who] works hard to maintain that edge, to resist ... the temptation to soften the approach,' (2008, p. 25) comments that 'you can always see where a writer has lost [their] nerve' (cited in Steger, 2008, p. 25). She does not specify exactly what forces exist to make a writer lose their nerve but it is interesting to note that she chose to write fiction in her latest work *The Spare Room*, a novel that exists somewhere between fiction and non-fiction and explores the 'ugly feelings that could emerge when someone is caring at a very basic level for someone else' (Steger, 2008, p. 25). Surprised by the anxiety readers have about this blurring between fiction and 'whatever the other thing is called,' Garner says 'people do want to know what will be expected of them if they open a book, or what they can expect of the writer' and explains that 'even though it may be very close to real experience, I have taken the liberties I am allowed to take if I am writing fiction' (Steger, 2008, p. 24). I wonder if

Garner could be suggesting that the ugly feelings that emerged would be tolerated more easily in a fiction than memoir. Perhaps Garner, like me, could have qualms about being disliked by the reader.

I have chosen to describe my work as **fictionalized** memoir to enjoy the greater liberties that Garner refers to, enabling me 'to scrub-bash all the way and make [my] own path' (Garner cited in Steger, 2008, p. 25): that is, to write in resistance to the standard blueprint or type of memoirs being written by most white women in Australia today and to delve into murky areas where the protagonist Eliza, and possibly myself as the fictionalized memoirist, risk being disliked by the reader, or being accused of racism. That said, there were occasions in the fictionalized memoir where I was influenced by discourses on cultural relativism and a range of postfeminisms, and I did lose my nerve. Sometimes I softened and censored some of the raw ugly feelings that arose. For example, after Eliza's encounter with an intransigent Head of Department, Mansoor, I censored her/my initial response and elided the exclamation 'arrogant bastard' and elected to write instead:

*I took some deep breaths. Don't blow it. Calm down. Don't let him know he's got to you. Deep breaths. Finally I drew two more strokes next to the first bundle of five and picked up my notepad.*

*'Thank you for your time, Mansoor. And for letting me know what you think about our project. I hope that in time you'll come to see the LDU as something useful for your department. (Rumney, 2012, p. 140)*

However, on other occasions, I have chosen to include the primal ugliness of anger and revenge as exemplified in this extract from the fictionalized memoir referring to Eliza's post-rape reaction to further potential sexual harassment or violence:

*I'd been here before. I knew what to do. Sometimes it scared me what I might do to them. What I could be capable of. I think back to that time at the beach in Brunei.*

*I am heading back towards the car park. A human shape is coming towards me in the half light. Narrow shoulders, slim hips, dark hair. I go into woman alone at night mode. I slip on my fuck off face. My head goes up. I quicken my step slightly. My strides are firm and strong. I increase my body size with power walk arm swings.*

*I note a long piece of drift wood ahead. Near where our bodies will pass. Suddenly I realise I don't want to avoid being harassed. I actually want a fight.*

*I want him to make some move, give me some excuse so I can attack him. So I can hit him with that piece of wood and keep hitting him until his face is pulp. Keep hitting him until my anger is spent. And then I would leave him, for the tide to tumble, for the crabs to suck on. And I would feel no remorse. He would be the one to pay. For what happened to me, for what happens to women the world over, today and stretching back for millennia. He will pay.*

*(Yes, I was in a dark place. And sometimes it was so dark I could not see my way, let alone dance back into the world. The crux of the matter is how long you choose to stay there, and the damage you do while you're there). (Rumney, 2012, p. 26)*

Shortly after the above extract, aware of the violent, vengeful images evoked in the above passage, and of the 'chick lit' expectations of some female readers and their need to like the protagonist, Eliza directly addresses the reader and their possible expectations:

*I wasn't always like this. So hard, so defensive, so jaded.*

*Paranoid.*

*And I fear that you, dear reader, will probably not read on if you have started to dislike me. Ah, such high standards are expected of the memoirist. Bad behaviour must always be explained, apologized for. Redemption must follow. I can't promise these things so I've inserted a little flashback to kinder days, a gentler me. I think you might have liked me back then. (Rumney, 2012, p. 28)*

To highlight my resistance as a fictionalized memoirist to the rigid application of cultural relativism and its erasure of the uneasy and shifting power relationship between black men and white women, and the foregrounding of racism over sexism, I write the following at the beginning of the fictionalized memoir:

*Yes, I would love to have his arse lashed.*

*His black arse.*

*There, I said it. I can hear your collective gasp of horror. However, his arse is black, and what's more it bulges with muscle and struts around on gym-junkie legs. It's an image that is seared into my brain. For me it's about him, the person and the arse, not race. But still, I can hear you chanting. Racist. Racist. Racist. Such a trigger-happy word. Racist? But am I ... really? Who has the power? Would your blood pressure drop if I tell you he is British? An*

*engineer and handsomely paid? That his long-suffering wife is Filipina? That my rejection of his sexual advances had nothing to do with the colour of his skin and everything to do with my human right to reject sexual predation? (Rumney, 2012, p. 6)*

This paragraph is deliberately provocative. The use of the phrase ‘his black arse’ was chosen with thought, care and full knowledge of its historical significance in terms of black slavery and its probable impact upon the reader under the swirling discourses of rigid cultural relativism described in previous paragraphs. It is used to challenge the reader by encouraging them to think more deeply about issues that usually elicit kneejerk reactions about what is culturally sensitive or even racist. It is encouraging the reader to ask questions. Is it racist to include the adjective ‘black’ in this phrase? Who has the power in this situation? Eliza or Everton? I am hoping to encourage readers to activate powers of empathy and understanding by looking beyond their own white, western world and into other worlds that, particularly for single women, are chaotic, uncertain and dangerous, where power and status shifts frequently according to the situation. I am asking the reader to question current definitions of racism in Australia today.

Current usage of the word, racism, by liberal left commentators in Australia seems to indicate that the definition has become so elastic that behaviours at both ends of the spectrum – from violence directed towards groups based solely on racial grounds through to criticism of another race or culture – are often universally condemned as racist. Lawrence Blum argues that the term ‘racism’ has been used ‘so broadly as to encompass virtually everything that goes wrong in the area of race’ (2004, p. 76) and that the term should be reserved for only ‘very serious moral ills’ (2004, p. 76). He even suggests that ‘perhaps we might even attempt temporarily to put the words “racism” and “racist” on hold; or, at least ...to try to use different words to express what we mean’ (2004, p. 77). Aboriginal spokesman, Noel Pearson, writes that ‘I have told Aborigines that the charge of racism must not be made lightly ... but is better understood as defensiveness’ (2010, p. 12). P. G. Lauren supports this argument and provides a list of other closely linked behaviours such as ‘cultural arrogance, religious fervor, nationalistic pride, materialistic greed, ideological conviction, and linguistic or ethnic distinctiveness’ (1988, p. 3) that could be substituted. Believing that it would be problematic to capture the meaning of racism into a single definition, Blum strongly believes that it would be more useful to give

instead an 'account of the diversity of racial phenomena that constitute moral ills, and a careful delineation of the moral character of each (2004, p. 77). Under these definitions, it could be argued that the use of the phrase 'his black arse' does not constitute a serious moral ill, perhaps more a defensiveness, and, therefore, is not a racist statement.

Another definition of racism, described by Joseph Barndt as 'prejudice plus power' to give effect to these prejudices (cited in Blum, 2004, p. 64), is pertinent for the analysis of power relations between Eliza and Everton in my fictionalized memoir, and black men and white women in general in my essay. While this definition could be critiqued for requiring racially virulent intentionality on the agent's part and thus assuming that harm is the only moral concern in racial bigotry (Blum, 2004, p. 64), I would argue that its reliance on context aligns with post-structuralist ideas of power as being situational, fluid and ever changing. Power as understood by Foucault, is 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their organisation; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them' (1981, p. 92). This definition neatly describes the power struggle that Eliza, white western woman, has with her harasser, Everton, black western man, in an Arab Moslem country. With racism defined as prejudice plus power, and a power struggle between Eliza and Everton that is situational, fluid and ever changing, once again it could be argued that the phrase 'his black arse' is not a racist comment.

I will now summarize my argument on the legitimacy of representing the Other. While agreeing that it would be impossible for a person from a majority culture to de-hegemonize themselves to occupy the subject position of the Other, I would argue that under extreme circumstances when no other representation is available, and when cultural practices considered insufferably, unarguably wrong by most cultures deny the human rights of women in a particular culture, the white western woman has the legitimacy to represent the Other. This legitimacy can be derived from a feminist ethics, as described below by academic and feminist activist, Leckie Hopkins:

*Throughout this decade of shifting understandings of the relationship between power, knowledge and the creation of the activist feminist self, I have come to understand that it is crucial that such a shift into less certain territory does not imply a shift into the utter relativism and paralysis of the politically disengaged.*

*As a post-structuralist feminist activist, one's assessments of issues are underpinned by a feminist ethics: rather than lapsing into disengaged relativism, one's passions are still engaged in fighting necessary battles. (2009, p. 66)*

But this begs the question: what if it is feminism, or more specifically, aspects of postfeminism, that is causing this disengagement?



## Postfeminisms 1

I began my fictionalized memoir with the following quotation from Megan Stack's memoir:

*And then, too, the truth is not really easy to admit or articulate. You can't admit how dirty it made you feel, the thousand ways you were slighted and how flimsy your self-assurance turned out to be, how those little battles bit at you like acid. Men who refused to shake your hand; squatting on floors with men who refused to look at your face because you brimmed with sin, not one glance in an hour-long interview; the sneering underfed soldiers who hissed and talked about your ass when you walked past. You can't admit it made you so bitter that, for a time, you looked at any woman who hadn't been where you had been as if she were an ingenue who didn't understand the world she occupied. She was blind to the dark, ruthless fraternity of men – all men, all around the globe – how luridly dangerous they were, how we had to keep pushing against them or we'd wind up where we began hundreds of years ago. You are not supposed to say any of that. It proves you were never really up to the game, that you might as well have stayed home. So you pretend it's nothing, you tell everyone that you were lucky because you could talk to the women. (Stack, 2010, pp. 137-138)*

I began with this extract for several reasons: firstly, Stack's memoir is the only memoir I have found written by a white western woman working or travelling in another culture, particularly an Islamic culture, to directly address the unrelenting sexual harassment she experienced **and** to extrapolate these experiences into a wider assessment that challenges most postfeminist discourses today. This extract will therefore provide legitimacy and context for my own fictionalized memoir where I also resist what I see as the standard blueprint for female memoirists to underplay the sexual harassment that they experienced.

Secondly, I include this extract in order to deflect any judgement or censure from my female readers. Stack's reference to any woman who has not experienced what she had experienced as an ingenue highlights the disconnection between female journalists on the ground in hostile male territory and western women 'safe' in their

suburbs in western countries. It also highlights the pressure of postfeminist rhetoric and the standard blueprint for female memoirists to be complicit in what appears to be a conspiracy of silence around what can still be a reality for women in male territory – sexual harassment and belittlement. Stack writes that she is not supposed to say any of that and that the truth is not really easy to admit or articulate implying that silence and omission maintain the mythology and protect the ingenues from the knowledge that perhaps equality has not been achieved. She fears that by admitting she was not really up to the game, she would be broadcasting personal failure, or even more odious, the suggestion that she struggles in a man's world, thus refuting the postfeminist discourses on the empowerment and equity women are now supposed to enjoy.

While it is outside the scope of this essay to explore this topic in depth, I will explore some contemporary arguments to demonstrate the complexities of the issue and the range of postfeminisms that exist today. Some feminists, such as Leckie Hopkins (2006), believe that the idea that we live in a postfeminist world is a 'nonsense' and prefer to use the term third wave feminism to refer to a newly shaped and still necessary feminist activism informed by poststructuralist attention to difference and diversity. Other feminists, such as Sophia Phoca and Rebecca Wright, agree that feminism is not over but still use the seemingly misleading term postfeminism to define a feminism whose development was informed by psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism (1999, p. 3). They see postfeminism as a reaction to the reductionist identification of feminism with political correctness and victim politics and believe it subscribes to the desire for empowerment and the celebration of different ways in which women can express their sexuality (1999, p. 171).

Other feminists, such as Susan Owen, Sarah Stein and Leah Vande Berg, define third wave feminists as feminists who want to express their sexuality without the guilt generated by patriarchal values and second-wave feminist qualms about sexual objectification (2007, p. 9). Owen, Stein and Vande Berg challenge what they see as the third wave feminist claim that women have now gained empowerment through a postfeminist freedom to choose **as a consumer** (2007, p. 10), 're-appropriation of the male gaze' for their own pleasure (2007, p.106), and the replacement of sexual oppression by a sexual playfulness (2007, p. 241). They also challenge the view presented by popular media, under the guise of this postfeminist rhetoric, that the

battle for equality has been won and that gender is no longer a constraint for women (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, Owen, Stein and Vande Berg, regard third wave and postfeminism as two separate movements:

*Third Wave feminism defines itself through playful embrace of popular culture, exuberant expression of sexual identity and desire, rejection of a feminist/feminine binary, and an individualist understanding of choice. Postfeminism appropriates these ontological tenets for the benefit of capital culture, a practice commonly termed “commodity feminism” or “market-place feminism.” Angie Manzano describes free-market feminism as “focus[ing] on personal freedoms instead of women’s rights, [on] personal maneuvering instead of structural oppression, and [on] personal choices instead of collective action.” (2007, p. 123)*

Sarah Projansky further divides postfeminism into four distinct styles:

- (1) dead feminism postfeminism reasons that feminism is no longer needed;*
- (2) backlash postfeminism is both anti-feminism and anti-victimization;*
- (3) equality postfeminism equates feminism with individual choice; and*
- (4) pro-sex postfeminism is commodity feminism. (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 124)*

For the purposes of this essay, I will be focusing on the fourth category, commodity or pro-sex postfeminism as it is pertinent to many of the memoirs I will be examining.

According to Owen et al, the two very popular television series *Ally McBeal* and *Sex in the City* predominantly represent commodity or pro-sex postfeminism. In these series, the straight white female characters indulge without guilt in the pleasures of popular culture: dining in restaurants, dancing in nightclubs, shopping for clothes, shoes and accessories and investing in high maintenance grooming including spa treatments and waxing. They aggressively pursue male sexual partners and talk frankly about their sexual encounters. They ‘desire the male gaze and find power in manipulating it for social pleasure, but not for economic gain or survival’ (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 124). For them, consummate professionalism in the workplace is not undermined by highly sexualized bodily display and, if at times they are vulnerable, they are never victims.

Moving from the medium of television to the medium of memoir, and given that I twice refer to *Sex and the City* in my fictionalized memoir, I now wonder about the influence of fifteen years of pro-sex and commodity postfeminism portrayed in

various media on other white western female memoirists over the same time period and what part it has played in providing the standard blueprint. If we take two strands of post-feminism rhetoric - the reaction against political correctness, including cultural relativism, and victim politics, it would appear that many of the modern western memoirists I studied, such as Kate Holden, Tegan Walker, Gina Wilkinson and Gillian Lauren, are more influenced by a desire to cast off the latter rather than the former, thereby following the standard blueprint. While exercising cultural relativism in the form of heightened cultural sensitivity and sometimes deference or reversal, and caveats admitting western privilege and prejudice, many of the modern western female memoirists I studied presented themselves as empowered to make informed choices, suggesting that any form of abuse arose from their own poor decision making and lack of risk assessment. Most of these female memoirists were careful not to present themselves as victims when abused in any way, and some emerged more than just a survivors but as winners – their difficulties forged fabulous new character traits that created further empowerment. Their journey was personal and little or no analysis was made of the cultural or institutional forces that helped create their misfortune or abuse in the first place.

Joanna Bourke comments that this focus on female empowerment is part of a ‘hostile ideological environment in which responsibility for social problems *generally* [is] moving away from the state toward a neo-liberal and conservative emphasis on individual risk management’ (2007, p. 434) and believes that women, once again, are being held responsible for their own abuse. This is a disturbing development particularly if, as found in an ICM Poll in 2005, ‘one in every three *women* believe that women who acted flirtatiously are partially or totally responsible if they end up being raped (Bourke, 2007, p.406) indicating that many women collude in a legal system which, as previously stated, appears to tolerate rape.

Many of the above issues – rejection of victim politics, individual responsibility and empowerment arising out of abuse – are represented in Tegan Wagner’s memoir *The Making Of Me: Finding My Future After Assault*. It is interesting to note that the word ‘rape’ has been substituted by a less emotive word ‘assault.’ In Joanna Bourke’s text on rape, the lettering of the title is discreetly coloured in white against pale grey. This could suggest that the publishing world is squeamish about the presence of this word on book covers indicating a general discomfiture with the topic itself despite the ongoing prevalence of rape. Wagner may not have the word rape or

sexual assault on the cover of her book, but this does not mean she subscribes to victimhood; on the contrary, she is not just a survivor but has triumphed over her sexual assault. At the end of the memoir, Wagner states that she does not regret what happened to her despite the fact gang rape at the age of fourteen was ‘horrible’ and that she suffered from depression, anxiety attacks, bulimia, self-harm, drug abuse post-rape and that all her relationships were put under ‘enormous pressure’ (2007, p. 239). I find this worrying given that Bourke describes a recent trend where ‘actual [rape] victims are expected to take responsibility for healing themselves, primarily through speech acts’ and that ‘as a consequence, women's bodies could be collapsed once again into “rape space”, mere “embodiments of risk”’ (2007, p. 431). I find it particularly worrying that this trend fits neatly into a commodity feminism operating ‘for the benefit of capital culture’ and that the appropriation of feminism by neo-capitalism works against the right of women to inhabit public and private space without fear of sexual predation from men.

This attitude is reflected in my fictionalized memoir through the character of Eliza who, while not wishing to be viewed as a victim, does not regard her drug rape as the making of her. In contrast to Wagner, Eliza writes:

*And redemption? You may recall I never promised redemption. Some things that have been taken can never be replaced. I do regret what happened to me and I don't think I'm necessarily a better person for it. My spirit has been punctured, like a hole in the heart, and it labours on, in hope of recovery. Yes, I'm both stronger and weaker. Both softer and harder. I cry easily for others, for myself, but can just as easily sink into a world of numbness, just to survive. I've been taken down into the dark cold world of sociopaths. I know how easily they are made, how easy it is to pass on the sins of the father, the mother, the other. When you are pushed down into the dirt, and no one lifts a hand to help, people pass without a glance, oh, I understand how easy this would be to do unto others, the power you would feel, how the pain would be transferred to ease your own. You would no longer be alone. I recognize sociopaths easily now, I note the predator eye, the dead meat heart, and I know the lines. And they know that I know, and come after me. I know the tricks of their trade, and I know that if I chose to, if I could just combine that emotional shut down with those tricks they taught me, I could become like them. But I choose not to. I choose to live with all the pain of feeling and knowing that the little hole in my*

*four-chambered callous makes life precarious but also provides a little opening for love. This is my life now. And if I could undo what happened to me, I would do it with all my heart).*

*(Rumney, 2012, p. 212)*

While Wagner's fierce determination to 'take back the power' (2007, p. 242) and not be destroyed by this gang rape is admirable, and fits neatly into third wave or postfeminisms that advocate a shift in focus 'from pain to possibilities' (Hopkins, 2009, p. 111), I feel a certain unease with her comment that 'If this had to happen to somebody, I'm glad it happened to me because I was strong enough to take it' (2007, p. 239). It seems to be following a blueprint or trend in memoirs where female protagonists struggling in a man's world, whether reporting from Iraq or Afghanistan, such as Gina Wilkinson or Megan Stack, or battling a legal system that favours the alleged rapist, are determined to reshape their story so that they emerge as empowered survivors regardless of what happens to them. Unfortunately, the attendant assumption is that those who admit to being destroyed or severely traumatised by the experience, or admit defeat, are somehow failing themselves and their sisters in this alleged postfeminist world. Or as Megan Stack writes: 'You are not supposed to say any of that. It proves you were never really up to the game, that you might as well have stayed home. So you pretend it's nothing ...' (Stack, 2010, pp. 137-138).

In my own life, the life on which my fictionalised memoir is based, I had no such qualms. I considered myself to be up to the game and indeed battled on for over two years, but I did not want to pretend that what happened to me was nothing. I did not want to say that I had been empowered by my experiences when I had actually been diminished and exhausted by them. The sexual harassment and corruption I experienced at the hands of both Arab and western men and organizations were relentless and I decided that no human should have to put up with such behaviour. After performing a risk assessment of my situation, I chose to return to Australia to forge a new life. For me, despite the temptations of power, disposable income and travel opportunities that my job provided me, in the end it was the issue of human dignity and spirit – I felt that my spirit was being crushed – that prompted my decision to leave the Gulf State.

While Megan Stack refers to the dark ruthless fraternity of men, another so-called honorary man war zone journalist, Gina Wilkinson, taking advantage of newly gained rights that enable her 'to slip into men's skin, to take on the so-called male

identity' (Irigaray, 1994, p. 79) makes no attempt to analyse the situation or extrapolate beyond her own extraordinary experiences in Iraq into a wider commentary on gender relations. Sexually harassed on a regular basis by Iraqi men (2007, pp. 44-46), terrorized by a potential rapist trying to break into her house (2007, p. 127), fighting off Iraqi men almost ripping her clothes from her body while she was trying to report a story (2007, pp. 271-272), bullied by her male Iraqi interpreter (2007, pp. 303-304), betrayed by her Iraqi female friend (2007, p. 240), undermined by jealous ABC colleagues (2007, p. 343) and unsupported logistically and emotionally by a callous western female boss (2007, p. 254), Wilkinson took on what could be called 'masculine' behaviours such as risk-taking by dodging cluster bombs (2007, p. 323) and wisecracking about how her clothes were almost torn from her body in order to play her role as a foreign correspondent (2007, p. 276). At the end of her memoir, she was betrayed by Machiavellian workmates (2007, p. 332) who failed to appreciate the war-zone conditions under which she was working, condemned on *Media Watch* for allowing children to play on unexploded bombs so she could file a story about it (2007, p. 321) and then sacked by the ABC. It is ironic that after being encouraged or even coerced into taking on so called masculine behaviours such as risk-taking, blogger comments such as 'syphilitic media slut' and 'baby killer' (2007, p. 347) suggest that Wilkinson was now being condemned for not behaving like a woman. It was a no-win situation for Wilkinson.

Despite the 'resentment' that boils within her at 'management for failing to provide the support' she needed, Wilkinson internalizes her failure: 'It's partly my fault. Perhaps I should have gone over my editor's head and complained. Perhaps I should have told him about Mr Saadi [her interpreter] and his bullying ways. It's too late now. They'll just sound like excuses' (2007, p. 343). When one of her ABC colleagues says "It's shameful, what these people have done to you ... I've never encountered anything so low. One day I might write something about this," Wilkinson responds 'I almost cry out loud at the bitter irony. He's talking about ABC internal politics, not my story; a war in the wilds of Ultimo, not Iraq' (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 344). However, the bitter irony for me is that Wilkinson does not seem to be aware that her shameful treatment may have occurred because she is a woman working in a male dominated world and that this in itself could be newsworthy. The closest she comes to making this connection is when she writes 'The new girl has

been expelled, without learning the inside jokes and passwords of Ultimo' (2007, 348). When reading her memoir, I made the following notes:

*It seems like a catch 22. If she had been more assertive earlier on, insisted on a cameraman, paid accommodation and a cooperative interpreter, would this have been seen as female weakness? If these requests had been granted, would she have survived? If she had used feminine wiles to handle her interpreter, Mr Saadi, would her job have been easier? If she had reacted as a mother, not a journalist, and refused to photograph children playing on the unexploded missiles, would she have kept her job? Would her female boss have treated her differently if she were a man? Would her jealous ABC colleagues have supported her if she were a man? For me the gender issues are glaring. (Rumney, 2011)*

Unlike the journalist who made the comment 'her ordeal reveals the scandalous treatment of women that is the real human rights abuse in the West Bank' (Souad, 2003) on the back cover of *Burned Alive*, a 'true' story about a young Palestinian woman who was set alight by her brother for bringing grave dishonour to her family, perhaps Wilkinson is missing an important point. Perhaps she fails to realize that her story could also highlight ongoing shameful treatment of women and help dismantle the mythology around some aspects of postfeminist rhetoric, by admitting that women of all races can still face overwhelming obstacles (while acknowledging the many layered and additive oppression that black women face) working and living in male dominated societies and workplaces, and due to the lack of acknowledgement of this fact, and their own complicity in concealing it, receive little understanding, support and empathy. Perhaps this is the greater irony.

When I read memoirs about former prostitutes and escort girls describing their working lives in terms of empowerment and choice, while acknowledging the postfeminist belief that women should not be told how to define their sexuality, I find that their definition of empowerment sits uneasily alongside my own definition which links such postfeminist notions of power, choice and self-determination to the worth and dignity of the human spirit. For example, in Kate Holden's memoir, *In My Skin: A Memoir*, about her life as a heroin addict and prostitute, when describing her male clients, statements such as 'and I reminded myself that I was the one sought; it was I who was in control' and 'sex, in this world, was my power' (2005, pp. 170-171) are contradicted by other statements on the same page such as 'at times I was



disconcerted by the aggression of sex ...and I could do nothing but cling to arms and ribs and hips ...' and "men ... who thrust on and on for half an hour heedless of my fatigue ...who grabbed me cruelly, who fucked me like a whore ... I felt my face go pale with pain' (2005, pp. 171-172).

Holden is proud of her professionalism, and despite the obstacles described above, exerts 'control to be the best working girl [she] could be' (2005, p. 172). Despite her 'little nugget of rage' (2005, p. 176), admission that 'sometimes girls got really hurt' (2005, p. 178) and description of being anally raped by a client, Holden 'rarely hated [her] mugs' and is offended when other prostitutes describe their Indian clients as 'currymunchers' or 'stinky.' Holden comments that 'for the first time in my life [she] heard overt racism bandied around' and primly replies, 'Actually ...I think he's a Sikh, from Sri Lanka. It's part of his religion to wash several times a day' (2005, p. 184). I find it intriguing that in a workplace where not just sexism but misogyny flourishes at the hands of some clients who heedlessly or deliberately inflict pain upon her, Holden either retains a sense of cultural sensitivity to defend clients from racial slurs, or feels it necessary to tell readers that she has. While not condoning the racial slurs, I do examine Holden's condemnation of their use in the micro context of a brothel, given the unequal power relations between client and prostitute, and question the foregrounding of racism over sexism in this instance. And when experiencing cruelty or pain, Holden says that 'she felt [her] soul clench' (2005, p. 171), I question her belief that she actually does have control and power, and wonder what part the worth and dignity of the human spirit plays in her empowerment. If Holden's fellow sex workers had been referring to American clients as yanks or donut munchers, would Holden have felt compelled to make her culturally sensitive response? Could it be that, as journalist Zoltan Kovacs suggests, 'people generally are more likely to regard critical comments as racist if they are directed against vulnerable minorities rather than against the rich and powerful (2010, p. 36). In my fictionalized memoir, I explore this contention when Eliza ponders over whether a single white western woman or an extremely well-paid black western engineer had greater claim to minority status in an oil rich Arab Moslem state and in my choice to include the phrase 'his black arse' with its attendant risk of being denounced as a racist comment.

In terms of the interplay between cultural relativism and self-respect, I strongly support Irigaray's notion that 'to respect the other as other ... requires the respect of self' (2004, p. 175) and, while I applaud Holden's poststructuralist ability to respect

her clients and take into account their ‘particularities, differences, contingencies’ (Irigaray, 2004, p. 175) under extremely challenging circumstances, I see little evidence of self-respect and even less evidence of an Irigayan ‘spiritual relation to the other’ in her directive for women to ‘open up within [herself] a non-inscribed space, a virgin space, if you will, from which she [can] listen to and welcome the other’ (2004, p. 175). Irigaray believes that virginity could be the name for the ‘spiritual interiority of woman,’ and ‘a return of the feminine to the self’ despite existing in a ‘culture in the masculine’ (2004, p. 161). However, I do not see Holden’s vagina or anus as a non-inscribed or virgin space ... to welcome the other. I see both as a place for abuse. To be fair, perhaps Holden finds this virginal interiority when she ‘set[s] to dreaming the hour away while they ploughed at [her],’ a space from which, with some male clients, she can still ‘feel warm with the joy of real human contact, an unexpected kindness, a sincere compliment’ (2005, p. 171) and that ‘how every man, however unprepossessing, might bear a kind of grace’ (2005, p. 170). Or can these poststructuralist declarations of shifting power and control, and the ability to see grace in all her clients, however abusive, sexually inept and arrogant, also be described as glossy postfeminist spin rebranding pain as empowerment?

In order to examine this further, I would like to examine two more postfeminist strands to Owen, Stein and Vande Berg’s challenge to the notion that women have now gained empowerment through a freedom to choose **as a consumer**, re-appropriation of the male gaze for their own pleasure and the replacement of sexual oppression by a sexual playfulness. These two strands - the postfeminist revival of the princess fantasy (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 242) and a post-modern re-appropriation of imperialist harem fantasies - are illustrated in Jillian Lauren’s memoir *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*. Like Kate Holden, Lauren is a sex worker. Unlike Holden, Lauren is not a heroin addict. An aspiring actress in New York, Lauren chose to become a topless dancer and then work as a prostitute in an escort agency. While admitting that the combination of a ‘shitty relationship with [her] father, low self-esteem, astrologically inevitable craving for adventure, dreams of stardom, history of depression and anxiety, tendency towards substance abuse’ can create a sex worker, Lauren also admits that the financial rewards played a significant role in her choice: ‘... life in New York costs money and a kidney, and that was way more than I was making as a terrible cocktail waitress’ (2010, pp. 29-30).

Holden paints a glossy spin on her role as prostitute by describing herself as someone who grants redemption: 'I took them to the room as a priest might take a penitent' (2005, p. 170). In contrast, Lauren writes that 'I told myself I was a personal goodwill ambassador, single-handedly improving relations between Jews and Muslims the world over' but then has the introspection to admit in the next paragraph that she was 'no ambassador for anything other than [her] own wallet and [her] own desire to be feel desired' (2010, p. 127). In this way she is exercising her postfeminist right to reappropriate the male gaze and, as a consumer, to earn money by whatever means she chooses.

With money as the prime motivating force, and forty women competing for the attention of one man, there is no sisterhood in the harem. Fiona, Prince Jefri's favourite girlfriend, states this clearly when Lauren complains about the meanness of the other women: 'Stop being stupid. Are you here to make friends? ... I'm not your friend ... The money is your only friend' (2010, p. 175). Intriguingly, Lauren's mercenary attitude towards trading sex for money is accompanied by a dewy-eyed yearning to be rescued by her prince. Embroiled in the Byzantine scheming and backbiting of the harem to attract the very short attention span of Prince Jefri, the Sultan of Brunei's brother, Lauren subscribes to the princess fantasy: 'And maybe I would even make a prince fall in love with me and my whole life would change in dazzling and unexpected ways' (2010, p. 82) and throughout the memoir makes frequent references to Cinderella and the handsome prince (2010, p. 122) and a fairy godmother (2010, p. 326). She is not the only women in the harem to harbour the princess fantasy:

*The Prince was allowed four wives and he had only three. So the subtext for all the vindictive vying between the girls in Brunei was that the prize might be a crown. The game was this: Transcend all assumptions, transcend all invisible hierarchies, inspire the love than conquers all and you can turn from stepdaughter of the world – Thai teenage hooker, aging Playmate, flailing actress, retail slave, delusional rock slut - to princess. From duck to swan with a nod of his head. (2010, p. 162)*

While Holden is unwilling to expand on the source of her little nugget of anger, Lauren, although caught up in the power trip of capturing the gaze of a Prince and living out the princess fantasy, manages to analyse the situation and look beyond the surface gloss of her power:

*But here's the grimy, ugly truth: I shared [Prince Jefri's] bed and I felt I was part of something powerful and important ... Power tasted like an oyster, like I'd swallowed the sea, all its memories and calm and rot and brutality ... And if I had the feeling that the oyster was poisoning my blood, if I had an echo of a thought that something irretrievable was being traded, I nudged it aside. (2010, pp. 201-202)*

Lauren is also aware of the postmodern irony of being an empowered white western woman choosing to work in a modern day harem. She notices a painting on the wall and comments:

*It was a classic Orientalist portrayal of alabaster odalisques and their brown-skinned servants lounging by a harem bath. I had studied this kind of painting in art history, had analyzed each racist, imperialist brush-stroke. And here was a romanticized, nineteenth-century Western portrayal of a harem hanging one hundred and fifty years later on the wall of – a harem. It was positively postmodern.*

*A harem. Why hadn't I realized it before? We were neither party guests nor prostitutes. We were harem girls. (2010, p. 113)*

Lauren appears to be in on the joke but not the 'smirking irony' that Owen et al believe allows 'entrenched masculine hegemony [to reinstate] itself unopposed' (2007, p. 12) in terms of a post-orientalist postfeminism. After all, the Sultan of Brunei was the richest man in the world at the time and her white western privilege grants her few favours in a multi-cultural harem where Prince Jefri's favourite girlfriend is Filipina and the Sultan prefers Asian girls. However, again it would appear that racism is privileged over sexism. Lauren has analysed the racist brushstrokes of the orientalist painting of a harem but does not comment on its timeless sexist construction. Or, in a postfeminist world, can the sexist construction of the harem be elided if the harem girls have chosen to be there? Does the power of choice with its financial rewards, make it possible for Lauren to interpret the act of being passed from one royal brother to the other as a 'compliment rather than an insult?' She explains that she 'was some sort of a tribute paid, part of a system of honor and respect between brothers. I was a gift' (2010, pp. 205-206). According to Irigaray, to respect the other as other requires the respect of self (2004, p. 175) and yet I do not see that here. All I see is respect for the culture of the Other being privileged over respect for self.

It is at this point that I return to Irigaray in order to examine what I see as friction between the pro-sex and commodity postfeminist rhetoric - the power to choose **as a consumer**, reappropriation of the male gaze and the replacement of sexual oppression by a sexual playfulness - and the worth and dignity of the human spirit. Referring to the 'rule of money,' Irigaray states that the 'impoverishment of our world today stems from this inversion: money first, then life, without a rational analysis of that hierarchy of these values' (2004, p. 208). While putting the responsibility for this inversion mainly on the heads of men, Irigaray also holds women responsible for failing in their duties as citizens particularly when they console 'themselves for their servitude through a relative pleasure in being kept, through their desires to receive or buy gifts: furniture, clothes, jewellery, and so on. All this remains an integral part of an economic system in which we still live' (2004, p. 208). Furthermore, she states that 'it is becoming increasingly clear that money can never be enough to guarantee either human identity or dignity' (2004, p.208).

Although not explicitly stated, towards the end of the memoir, perhaps Lauren has drawn the same conclusion from her experiences. Despite leaving Brunei with at least two hundred thousand Singaporean dollars, Tiffany and Cartier jewellery and suitcases filled with designer clothing, Lauren comments that she 'had severed the connection between[her] soul and [her] body so profoundly that [she] could barely feel [her] own skin anymore' (2010, p. 326). She had the freedom to choose earning a living as a harem girl but realises that this power and money came at a great cost. Selling body and soul earned her much wealth and material possessions but, as she states herself, it did not guarantee either human identity or dignity.

But did she reappropriate the male gaze? Was the sex playful rather than oppressive? As previously stated, Lauren wanted to be desired by men. When passed as a gift between brothers, she describes her encounter with 'Martin,' the Sultan of Brunei:

*Martin just wanted you to suck his dick. He politely requested that I do exactly that, after asking me to remove my clothes, walk back and forth, turn around, and then do a little dance. Afterward he cheerily sent me back to the helicopter with the pronouncement that his brother had good taste. (2010, p. 206)*

While the atmosphere appears to be cheerful, possibly polite and playful, I see little evidence of Lauren's reappropriation of the male gaze. Reappropriation of the male gaze suggests the power to choose and refuse what often follows the male gaze. Or it

suggests reappropriation and manipulation of the male gaze for personal pleasure rather than for economic gain (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 124). However, Lauren knew that to refuse the Sultan's request for fellatio would most likely result in a plane ticket home and if she was reappropriating the male gaze it was for both pleasure and economic gain. There is no reciprocity in their sexual encounter. Lauren parades in front of the Sultan, provides a sexual service and is sent back to the harem. Pro-sex, commodity postfeminism implies that if a woman has the power to choose, sex can no longer be considered oppressive, just playful. Therefore, it follows that if Lauren chooses to perform fellatio upon the Sultan she is not being oppressed but playful. But I ask, where is the self-respect, the worth and dignity of the human spirit in this situation? And where does the power really reside in a harem? With the royal brothers or with the women who choose to be in their harem? And, finally, without self-respect, and the worth and dignity of the human spirit, can a woman truly be empowered?

Irigaray also brings up the sticky issue of how women behave towards each other:

*If a man may do pretty well what he likes to a woman ... the same applies to a woman with respect to another woman. On this point, women's sins are too often left unmentioned or are assessed in terms of passion rather than in civil terms. (2004, p. 209)*

Unlike the world of Lauren's harem where competition and monetary gain preclude friendship, and in my own fictionalized memoir where the Bitchspirit on Eliza's shoulder represents the bitchy rivalry that still exists in a patriarchal society between women competing against each other for advancement in the workplace and for a small pool of eligible men, she envisages a world where 'models of woman's love relations with herself, with her mother, with her sisters, natural or spiritual' (Irigaray, 2004, p. 154) abound, and where women, understanding that they are 'situated in an interlacing of competing pressures concerning desire, love, work and try to surpass them through friendship' and do not 'allow a masculine charm or personal ambition to destroy our sorority' (Irigaray, 2004, p. 158). At the end of my fictionalized memoir, exhausted by battling the dual barriers of female rivalry and male sexism, Eliza craves a world envisaged by Irigaray where women resist patriarchal pressure to compete and conspire against each other:

*Sisterspirit, it doesn't have to be this way. Surely we can be friends and allies and accomplices? Surely we can help and support each other? Can we*

*love each other? I want to create a beautiful society of sisters, and show the world another way of being. For the world is changing, slowly, and it will be a better place for us, and our daughters.*

*So, spirit, what's it going to be? You are welcome to stay on my shoulder and be my sister, with all the pleasure and pain that that implies. Or you can float away on the warm sea, across the oceans, and land on the shores of another country, cleansed and ready to do good things. Your choice.*

*Goodbye, bitchspirit.*

*(Rumney, 2012, p. 212)*

At the end of the fictionalized memoir, Eliza craves a world where she is free to walk, to swim, to be where ever she likes 'without being harassed' and comments that 'surely that's my right. A human right. To pass freely on this planet?' (Rumney, 2012, p. 210). Her desire for this freedom echoes my own desire. The sexual harassment I experienced in the Middle East was not an isolated experience peculiar to just one region. It has been a constant irritant and source of fear, to lesser and greater degrees, in **all** the countries I have travelled alone as a woman.

## Postfeminisms 2

In 1987, I recorded in my journal the sexual harassment I encountered from local men while travelling alone in Sicily and outlined the various strategies I adopted in order to deal with it. After a local man had squeezed my left buttock and followed me into a carriage on a train, I wrote: 'As he squirmed further and further towards me, I gestured to him that if he came any closer I would pull the emergency cord above the window' (Rumney, 1987). Such tactics provided limited success, so I sought out fellow western travellers, preferably male, to provide some deterrent factor: 'As I waited on the platform for the train to Reggio to arrive, I searched in vain amongst hundreds of sailors for the welcoming sign of backpackers, blond hair, anyone or anything with a Western outlook!!' (Rumney, 1987). Sixteen years later, in the second chapter of my fictionalized memoir, I write:

*My western sense of personal space was violated within minutes. The guy behind me was so close I could feel his breath on my neck. This was followed by a sly handbrush to the butt. If he had poked me with a cattle prod the reaction would not have been less violent. I whirled and glared. The returned expression was one of hurt innocence. I knew that look. I knew that touch. I'd been here before. A few snarls and I managed to clear a space for myself, using my hand luggage as a buffer. I looked around for help. This was when a western man or family group became very handy. With close approximation and a bit of chit-chat, you could create the impression that the man was your husband or the group was your family. Unfortunately the only other westerners were two men a lot further up the queue. (Rumney, 2012, p. 11)*

And so, I ask myself, how can this still be happening? And, if this is just about sexual harassment, predominantly of young women, for a woman in her forties and presumably beyond the male gaze, how can this still be happening? Unless, of course, some other factor is at stake?

To answer this question it is necessary to explore the changes in the status of the white western women traveller in developing countries from imperial times to today.



Imperialist discourses supported the view that the Middle East was no place for a white woman by often portraying the Middle East as a place for adventure, male solidarity and eroticism. In his book on the cultural psychology of the Middle East, Gary Gregg writes that during imperialism the West did not have a single stereotype of the Middle East but used many different stereotypes to serve the projection and political purposes of the West (2005, p.25). As a result, the stereotypes were often contradictory. Orientalist writers have variously described Arab men as gentlemanly and violent, romantic and realistic, virile and poetic, nobly savage and aristocratic. Meanwhile Romantic artists titillated western minds by creating an erotic image of harem life. For example, Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies refer to noted painters such as Eugene Delacroix who played into the imperialist myth by depicting Moslem women as 'sensuous, inviting and submissive' (2004, p.103). This same mythology cast Indian women as 'inherently licentious and immoral' (Burton, 1992, p. 143).

In contrast, Mrinalini Sinha states that 'the image of the pure and passionless white woman as the helpless victim of a native male was a particularly powerful one in colonial society' (1992, p. 105). White men considered it a 'sacred duty' to keep their women safe; they 'jealously guarded white women from native society' (1992, p. 104) and according to one imperialist woman 'would, in short, prefer her to be as wholly absent from every kind of society as are the inmates of the zenanas' (Sinha, 1991, p. 104). Furthermore, the status of imperialist women, according to Antoinette Burton was 'grounded in the idea of superiority' and while 'Victorian sexual ideology cast woman as the weaker sex, it endowed her at the same time with unquestionable moral superiority, rooted in the ostensibly feminine virtues of nurturing, child-care, and purity' (1992, p. 138).

Today in a post-9/11 world, the images have shifted dramatically. Western media images of the Arab world depict mobs of young men brandishing guns and burning US flags, religious fanatics strapped with explosives and veiled women wailing over the bodies of loved ones. Embassies issue warnings about travelling to many Arab countries. Popular literature describes the oppression of both Arab and western women, powerless under the double yoke of tyrannical Moslem husbands and misogynistic customs and laws ascribed to Islam. Pornography set in the west now flows to the east while western movies, advertisements and TV suggest western women are promiscuous and available for any man who asks. Today's travel guides

offer advice to female western travellers on how to avoid sexual harassment in Arab countries. Few traditional harems still exist in the Middle East and many Moslem women have re-taken the veil as a sign of their faith and national pride. The Middle East is no longer seen by most westerners as a place of adventure and exoticism. The romantic sheik is now a suicide bomber, the dancing girl, no longer sensuous and inviting, is now covered by a big black chador and the poetic older brother is now an honour killer. Portrayed by much western media and literature as physically dangerous and ideologically repellent, the Middle East now, more than ever, could be considered no place for a western woman.

Today the status of white western women has changed significantly from the status they enjoyed in imperialist times. Western women are no longer protected by imperialist notions of power and superiority. Media in the east and west no longer portray western women as morally virtuous unlike many Moslem women who, as previously stated, have retaken the veil and remain secluded as a sign of their faith. The status of the white western woman traveller in developing countries is now ambiguous. Located 'where many forces converge ... where the past and present conjoin' (Farred, 2002, p. 359), white western women find themselves trebly harassed by local men: firstly, for the myth that they are inherently licentious and immoral as portrayed by western media, particularly in movies and television series, presenting a pro-sex and commodity form of postfeminism to the developing world; secondly, they are simultaneously envied and resented for their western privilege in terms of the wealth and freedom to travel; and thirdly, for trespassing in the male public sphere. However, according to Moroccan academic Fatima Mernissi, eastern women are also subject to harassment. She states that 'to this day, a woman standing in a street or sitting on a beach or in a cafe becomes the object of aggression and humiliation: the ageless collective memory which drives women back into domestic space breaks out violently' (1982, p. 189). A recent newspaper article suggests that this situation continues today in the Arab world: 'The harassment, including groping and verbal abuse, appears to be designed to drive women out of public spaces and seems to happen regardless of what they are wearing' and occurs because 'men were threatened by an increasingly active female labour force' (el Deeb, 2009, p. 45). This suggests that the harassment is not primarily sexual in nature, or that men of colour are inherently lascivious. Perhaps it is more about power and keeping women out of public male space.

Although no longer considered helpless, and insulated to a degree by greater wealth than most locals, perhaps the white western woman today, subject to local culture and laws, is still in need of protection? But from what source? This protection is no longer seen as a sacred duty by some western men in postcolonial countries. In my fictional memoir, the western General Manager of the Four Seasons hotel refuses to intervene when Eliza is harassed, stalked and verbally abused by a fellow guest, Everton:

*Deciding to go over his head, I rang the General Manager of the Four Seasons. I'd seen him presiding over his domain. A great hulking German guy, about six foot three inches.*

*'I don't want anything to do with this. It's a personal matter. People can do what they like. Call the police.'*

*'Are you telling me you think it is acceptable behaviour for a man to sexually harass and verbally abuse a woman then?'*

*'You're putting words into my mouth. I have witnesses here. You're on speaker phone.'*

*'No, I'm trying to repeat my understanding of what you have said.'*

*'I have heard a little bit about it.'*

*'You haven't heard my side.'*

*'I'm in meetings all day. I can't meet with you.'*

*'I want to meet with you face to face. Talking over the phone will not do.'*

*Silence.*

*'Are you saying that the Four Seasons does not have a policy on sexual harassment of guests?'*

*'No we do not.'*

*'Is this just your hotel or is it a worldwide lack of policy?'*

*Silence.*

*'I am absolutely stunned by your gross dereliction of duty. Is this how the GM of a Four Seasons hotel ought to behave?'*

*Silence.*

*'OK, so you're not prepared to handle this internally? Well, I will go to the police. Thanks for the suggestion.'*

*Silence.*

*'Oh, and one last thing, would you behave like this in the west?' (Rumney, 2012, p. 165)*

This suggests that perhaps the white western man himself is threatened by an increasingly white female labour force in the formerly male territory of the Middle East. Earlier in my fictionalized memoir, after talking with a group of Australian businessmen at trade conference, Eliza comments:

*I knew I should have left but some kind of morbid curiosity held me there. I just wanted to know how god-awful these guys really were. It was as if I knew there were maggots in the tube but I had to squeeze out every last one.*

*'So, what are you doing here in Gulf State? Here with your husband?' asked one old fart.*

*'I'm working here, actually.'*

*'Nurse?'*

*'Consultant for the government, actually.'*

*'Ah, every time I see you career girls, I just think to myself, "another man out of a job."'*

*I felt distanced in time and space. For me, it was like a satirical comedy. I kept expecting someone with a clapboard to yell "Cut" and they would all fall out of character and back into western men in the twenty-first century. No man today can be that blatantly sexist ... surely. I turned to leave and once again Don held my arm.*

*'Hey, if it all gets too tough, you can always come to me. We're always looking for new PA's.'*

*I looked at this fat-gutted man with his high paying managerial position in a building company – this man who never got past high school - and wondered if he was baiting me? I looked at all the grinning men around me and wondered if they were baiting me too? But no, they were genuine and, somehow, that just made their attitudes even harder to stomach. I felt that I had scratched away at the PC veneer of western men and discovered the rotten misogyny that had never gone away.*

*I turned and walked quickly out the door. I was ready to throw my lot in with the Arabs. At least they sugar-coated their own brand of sexism with some chivalry. (Rumney, 2012, p. 148)*

Apparently held in check in the west by thirty years of social movements and civil laws or a politically correct veneer, the reappearance of overt sexism and misogyny in western men living in Moslem or other developing countries is a topic frequently discussed by expatriate women, particularly in relation to western male sex tourism and mail order brides, but is rarely raised in memoir. In fact, I have only found one other memoirist who directly refers to the issue. In her memoir about her experiences as an American Moslem doctor working in Saudi Arabia, Qanta Ahmed states:

*I was slowly becoming aware that chauvinism and sexism was just as marked among many of the Western attendings as it was amongst many of the Saudi and other Arab physicians, as though the climate of the workplace promoted an infectious transmission of male supremacy... a heady mixture for weaker men from all parts of the world ... they sucked in male supremacy with surprisingly little aversion. Quickly they themselves became vectors of oppression. It took an extraordinarily strong, sound-minded, and secure man to protest to the benefits and intoxicating ascendancy of being a man in the Kingdom entailed. (2008, pp. 73-74)*

I have also found that another feature of life or travel for western women in developing countries - sexual harassment - is either underplayed or unacknowledged in most media or literature including memoirs and travel guides (unless written by a woman for women travellers). Most travel guides, while providing tips on how women can avoid sexual harassment in a separate section, appear to underplay the frequency, seriousness or frightening nature of the problem for women. In fact, in the latest edition of Lonely Planet edition on Oman, UAE and the Arabian Peninsula, the authors blithely advise female travellers to appear confident and to 'keep a sense of humour' (*Oman, UAE and Arabian Peninsula*, 2010). In contrast, anecdotal evidence and blog entries from many solo women travellers acknowledge that sexual harassment can be relentless, frightening, and endemic to many regions in the world. While some western solo travellers state that they experienced little sexual harassment, many more others frequently experienced it. For example, on an Indian travel website, western solo female traveller Irma writes:

*I have just returned from a month travelling around India on my own. I have travelled by myself for long periods of time for the last 12 years visiting West Africa, Mexico, SE Asia and Europe. I had read about women being annoyed in*

*India, so I was sort of prepared ... I am very sorry to say I was bothered by men all the time. I was touched constantly, even up to 10 times a day, on the streets, shops, trains, buses etc. It was unbearable, I used to complain and shout and push, but they just looked at you like nothing happened. I was touched on the bottom, chest, legs, arms, bump[ed] into constantly. Apart from being stared at all the time. I can only say I was very uncomfortable and felt pretty insecure. Unless their attitude changes I think less and less women tourist will visit India ... Anyway I am sorry to be so negative but this is my sincere opinion of India. I will not go back. (Indiamike.com, 2009)*

Other solo female travellers have found their experience to be more than just relentless or irritating. For them it was frightening. On another travel website, a solo western female traveller states that:

*... [in Egypt] the locals were terrifying ... I'm not a stupid traveller, nor a disrespectful traveller. But I was spat at, called a white bitch and hassled by one guy who went into great detail about what he and his four mates would like to do to me ... in Casablanca ... a guy walked up next to me and shoved his exposed tackle against my thigh while trying to herd me down another street. This was about 11am on a main road ... (Groundwater, 2007)*

While there is a sexual element to this harassment, attributed to western media portrayals of western women as lascivious and immoral in movies, television and pornography, the accompanying hostility, aggression and use of the term 'white bitch' would suggest that these men are also doubly resentful of the white western privilege that these women represent – not only do these female western travellers have enough disposable income in order to travel, but this wealth also enables western women a degree of freedom to move in public male space. Solo western female travellers are not just seen to be flaunting their wealth and privilege, but also the local customs in a way that challenges the status, privileges and entitlement of local men. In this way, white western female solo travellers are seen as interlopers on a grand scale. In this way, perhaps, as Fatima Mernissi suggests, the harassment is less about lasciviousness and more about humiliation and aggression – putting the woman back in her place in the home.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that most of the travel guides I have read fail to comment on or critique the cultures that create and condone the sexual harassment of all women by men in public space. Instead, potential victims of harassment are

expected to prevent their own victimization by taking extra precautions than those taken by their fellow male travellers – wear fake wedding rings, dress conservatively, use the chain or bolts to double-lock their hotel room door or push a large piece of furniture against it - and to tolerate with good humour any harassment that occurs despite the precautions taken. The apologetic nature of comments such as ‘I am very sorry to say’ and caveats about competence such as ‘I’m not a stupid traveller, nor a disrespectful traveller’ in the preceding blogs reveal the sub-text: a woman travelling alone must now perform risk assessment, take responsibility for, and remain culturally sensitive about, any sexual harassment or abuse. However, if one looks at the precautions that western women travellers are expected to exercise, the list is long and draconian, restricting freedom of movement and possibly creating a siege mentality. The US State Department issues the following advice on its Indian website:

*U.S. citizens, particularly women, are cautioned not to travel alone in India. Western women, especially those of African descent, continue to report incidents of verbal and physical harassment by groups of men. Known locally as “Eve-teasing,” these incidents can be quite frightening. While India is generally safe for foreign visitors, according to the latest figures by Indian authorities, rape is the fastest growing crime in India. Among large cities, Delhi experienced the highest number of crimes against women. Although most victims have been local residents, recent sexual attacks against female visitors in tourist areas underline the fact that foreign women are also at risk and should exercise vigilance. Women should observe stringent security precautions, including avoiding using public transport after dark without the company of known and trustworthy companions; restricting evening entertainment to well-known venues; and avoiding walking in isolated areas alone at any time of day. If you are a woman traveling in India, you are advised to respect local dress and customs. Ensure that your hotel room number remains confidential and insist the doors of your hotel room has chains, deadlocks, and spy-holes. In addition, only hire reliable cars and drivers and avoid traveling alone in hired taxis, especially during the hours of darkness.*

*(State Department, 2011)*

The fact that western female travellers of African descent report even higher incidents of verbal and physical from Indian men fits neatly into bell hooks’ proposal ‘that women of Color are triply oppressed by their race, class and gender’ (cited in

Hurtado, 1996, p. 46) though in this case, being wealthy enough to travel, perhaps they are attributed middle class status which could still be a disadvantage in developing countries by triggering envy in the local men. It adds another layer of complexity to the issue as, unlike white women targeted for their supposed promiscuity, gender, and western privilege, western female travellers of African descent are possibly also tapping into a hierarchy of racism where black people are placed at the bottom.

Given that sexual harassment (and the threat of rape) for western female travellers is so prevalent, it now must be asked why do so many white western female memoirists remain silent on the issue of sexual harassment or downplay its frequency and severity? Despite travelling or living in countries that have a reputation for harassing solo female travellers, such as Italy and India, many female memoirists such as Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love* either fail to mention sexual harassment or, like Sarah MacDonald, in her memoir, *Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure*, briefly refer to it and then bury the issue in a single paragraph. In doing so, I wonder if both these memoirists could be subscribing to discourses of rigid cultural relativism. Aware of their white western privilege and succumbing to feelings of postcolonial white western guilt, do they prefer to remain silent on the issue rather than negatively portray male members of a developing and postcolonial country? Are they influenced by backlash postfeminism, which is both anti-feminism and anti-victimization (Projansky cited in Owen, et al., 2007, p. 124), and works to prevent female memoirists, by virtue of their supposed equal status to men, to lapse into pain narrative or victimhood by being irritated or frightened by sexual harassment?

Lynne Minion's method for coping with sexual harassment is to resort to sarcasm and humour in *Hello Missus: A girl's Own Guide to Foreign Affairs*, a light-hearted, irreverent and provocatively culturally **insensitive** memoir of her experiences working in East Timor post-liberation from the Indonesians. Adopting what could be called pro-sex, commodity and anti-victimization postfeminisms, Minion arrives in East Timor clutching Chanel duty free cosmetics and 'a monstrous pile of luggage. Yep, my life is contained in a trolley – five pairs of shoes, only one with stiletto heels, indicating the extraordinary sacrifice I've made in coming here' (2004, pp. 2-3) and wishing to 'fall in love in one month' (2004, p. 120). Women are heavily outnumbered by men and Minion finds 'leering' Portuguese riot police a 'magnetic sight' (2004, p. 45) and sexual harassment to be amusing, a target for sarcasm,



perhaps not playful but certainly not oppressive: 'One kolega is patently unable to focus on my discussion with him thanks to the distraction provided by my tits, which are unfortunately positioned at eye-level for most Timorese men' (2004, p. 30). Perhaps the height differential may alleviate the fear factor, and this is why Minion fails to take a stalker seriously. She states that 'I am so busy ... but should I really risk rape? I hope my admirer is afraid of cockroaches the size of him. Still, I don't even bother going to the police' (2004, p. 101) but only weeks later discovers that her stalker has attacked another western woman with a machete, twice to the head and once through the hand. 'So I was lucky,' comments Minion (2004, p. 176).

Other memoirists, such as Megan Stack and Gina Wilkinson, in their memoirs about reporting in the Middle East, do not regard their harassment or stalking with such levity. The harassment is presented as significant, mostly as an irritant and demeaning, and, for Wilkinson, sometimes intimidating or frightening with the threat of rape from a stalker. While mostly staying away from cross-cultural gender issues, at one point in her memoir, *Sing and Don't Cry: A Mexican Journal*, an exasperated Cate Kennedy appears to break out of character as the culturally sensitive and privileged First World sojourner, to write the following about young Mexican men:

*Hey guera, how are jew? Ay mamacita, over here! Come home wit me baby! The machismo-sodden boys have seen the bootleg videos, and they know the score - the blonde westerner girl might frown and shake her head, but that's just her way of saying yes yes yes! She'll come across in the end, just like in the movie and in the comics! They're panting for it, blondes, they're immoral and easy and rich, they are here for some hot Latino love, the Mexicans, they are the greatest lovers in the world, they are famous. Oye, guera, here it is. (2005, p. 109)*

In my own fictionalized memoir, knowing that anger, even righteous anger, is alienating for many readers, I disguise the anger that I/Eliza felt by resorting sarcasm to express my/her frustration at being stared at and propositioned:

*The guy was of Middle-Eastern appearance. The MO showed very little imagination. Standard procedure. First there was the walk by, keeping a careful three metre distance. Then the first stand and stare. Find a lounge chair, move it into a more favourable position, lie on stomach and stare. Position obviously uncomfortable. Squirm. Get up. Walk by again. Observe*

*from a distance. Second stand and stare. Walk by again. Third stand and stare. Right, got every angle covered. Now for the approach. Speak.*

*'May I sit here?'*

*'No.' Now, keep tone neutral. Fine tuning act. Friendly will be misinterpreted as promiscuous. Unfriendly will be misinterpreted as aggressive and violent. No can mean yes. Women are coy. Men like a challenge.*

*'You have husband?' Just one day I'd love to reply, 'Yes, I do, but he lets me out to fuck every man who looks sideways at me.' Or, 'No, I'm single, white and western and that means I fuck anyone I meet on the street.' Instead I ask, 'Are you propositioning me?' Flat tones, indecipherable to even the most manipulative ear.*

*'Yes.' Full marks for honesty.*

*'I do not want your friendship.' Firm, fair but not friendly.*

*'You have girlfriends?' Oh yeah, and I pimp them out to men like you all the time.*

*'And I do not want to speak to you anymore. Please go away.'* (Rumney, 2012, p. 190)

It is my experience of harassment as a single woman in postcolonial countries, some oil-rich and Islamic, that has led me to challenge the extent to which white western women are supposed to enjoy their white western privilege. When working and travelling overseas, I often felt that my gender (and perceived vulnerability) was foregrounded, and that my white and western status, rather than bestowing privilege, stirred up envy and resentment, and was a distinct disadvantage. Consequently, I agree with Hurtado's belief that "we are all potentially in the oppressor category, because whether we have power over others varies from context to context and is primarily determined by race, class and gender (1996, p. 124) and, furthermore, in what I interpret as a challenge to both imperialist and Edward Said's placement of the Other in Orientalism, Hurtado's belief that:

*... within a Western tradition the assumption is that the oppressed should be the object of pity for the more enlightened, more educated folk, the notions that these "others" may have their own subjectivity and, in fact, see the privileged as deserving of pity (or ridicule) is inconceivable. (1996, p. 126)*

The subjectivity of the Other and their capacity to pity the seemingly powerful

westerner is evident in many memoirs written by women and set in developing countries. When asked whether she has children, memoirist Cate Kennedy writes:

*I feel defensive, boiling irritation brushing through me, the way it did the time Phil told me a campesino man asked him point-blank why we had no kids, and enquired curiously whether I 'worked' or not ... I reflect on how hard it is to shut up at a time like this. Hard to relinquish your perspective and tolerate, silently, the idea that you are to be pitied. (2005, p. 98-99)*

For Lynn Minion, the shifting nature of power and subjectivity is reflected in office politics. However, in this case, Minion is not pitied but ignored, resented and even despised by her East Timorese colleagues. She notes that her Timorese boss 'just ignores me; he is unwilling to accept advice from a malae [foreigner]' (2004, p. 30) and that other local male colleagues:

*... try to see up my skirt but otherwise they're not particularly pleased to see me. Already I am aware that 'malae' = scab foreigner,' the more accurate phrasebook translation, for it is not a popular beast here. We are a novelty at best, but generally we are perceived as the cultural imperialists, the colonisers. We are privileged, rich, educated, independent ... [cavort] with sexual abandon, [wear] indecent clothing ... and [flaunt our] wealth. (Minion, 2004, p. 31)*

After a Timorese female colleague begs for a sip of Lynne's wine, another local female colleague rounds on her with 'Do not bring your filthy Australian habits here and corrupt these girls ... just because you can behave like trash where you come from ...' (2004, p. 49). Embedded discourses on cultural relativism would suggest that Minion, being privileged, rich, educated and western, and as United Nations media advisor in a capacity building project, would occupy the superior position in this situation. However, in a very conservative Catholic country, her Timorese colleague's attack on her filthy Australian habits has enabled this colleague to adopt a simultaneous position of superiority and, in this case, a moral superiority.

In her exploration of simultaneous positioning of superiority, Laura Nader challenges the widespread and misleading assumption that white western women are 'better off' vis-à-vis their menfolk than their sisters in undeveloped countries, by asserting that these sisters, as part of nationalist, religious or ethnic movements, believe they are 'better off than their exploited Western sisters' (1989, p. 323). She refers to the varying 'male dogmas' that exist in developed and developing countries that maintain different patriarchal systems and believes that 'misleading cultural

comparisons support contentions of positional superiority which divert attention from the processes which are controlling women in both worlds' (Hatem cited in Nader, 1989, p. 323).

Nader also builds on Edward Said's assertion that the West has positioned itself as superior to the East by stating:

*This paper extends Said's observation that the Moslem world exists "for" the West, to include the notion that the West also exists "for" the Islamic world and serves as important contrastive comparison which restricts and controls women's resistance. (1989, p. 324)*

According to Nader, although the people of the Orient are fascinated by western technology, they are aware of the social problems as presented by western media, and this has created a 'siege mentality' whereby the move to greater fundamentalism with its erosion of women's rights is 'condoned as a protective act' (1989, p. 327). In this way, perceptions of the decadent west are used to restrict and control women. To exemplify this, Nader refers to the writings of Shaykh Sha'rawi. Contrasting Islamic society with a 'barbaric, materialist West,' Sha'rawi believes that western women are not respected as a class citing the sexual objectification of women through the 'multibillion dollar pornography industry as evidence' (1989, p. 333). In this way, it could be argued that both eastern and western women continue to be controlled by male interests using the lascivious and immoral status of white western women as the point at which many forces, including the discourses of commodity and pro-sex postfeminisms, converge. Commodity postfeminism supports neo-capitalism and can 'nullify through commodification the threat that feminism poses to patriarchy' (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 121). Pro-sex postfeminism as presented by western media can be manipulated by eastern men in order to control their own women. Consequently, the simultaneous positioning of superiority by both eastern and western women results in women from both worlds being played off against each other by male interests and each colluding in a patriarchal process that is oppressive to both.

Nader asserts that this control of western women depends heavily on the concept of incremental progress in the status of women (1989, p. 335) and she challenges the incremental nature of this progress by describing it as one where ground is both gained and lost (1989, p. 336) and 'evidence to the contrary is either minimized, or denied, or dealt with by turning the lens to the image of women in other cultures' (1989, p. 341) and the comforting thought that 'while it may be bad here it is

really worse in the Middle East or elsewhere' (1989, p. 330). This exemplifies how, according to Spivak, cultural continuity is assured by cultural explanations, coming from all sides, insiders and outsiders, and thus, through the eyes of an eastern academic, western women can gain another perspective on their widely assumed **postfeminist** status and the media-perpetuated belief that they enjoy equality with men.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have consistently argued that western discourses on the cultures of developing countries often fail to recognize or acknowledge that Others may have their own subjectivity and, in fact, see the privileged westerner as deserving of pity or disdain. As a result, these discourses are often characterized by rigid cultural relativism, hyper-cultural sensitivity, reversal and the privileging of racism over sexism. Often the western adherents of these discourses fail to recognize or acknowledge their own ethnocentricity or the embedded discourses they inhabit. They believe that, by withholding comment or critique, they are giving respect to the Other, when in my view they are displaying positional superiority and what I see as a paternalistic tolerance for cultural customs from which they are distanced. I argue that mutual respect and cultural sensitivity involves ongoing dialogue and an exchange of ideas between equal partners where neither adopts a positional superiority and has the right, within the context of an acknowledged ethnocentrism and deeply held values, and an Irigarayan respect for self and the Other, to comment on the other culture as long as the commentary is reciprocal.

By following the above premise, the fictionalized memoir I wrote provides an alternative narrative to most of the memoirs, and the standard blueprint for western female memoirists, I have discussed in this essay. In a world where a variety of postfeminisms jostle each other, where power is situational, fluid and mutable, the commonly held stereotype about the white woman being inherently at risk from the lascivious black man is both held up **and** dismantled. Steering away from the 'chick lit' imperative that every woman must find her man, Eliza is still single at the end of the memoir and has possibly helped prevent another woman from finding her man. Moreover, at the beginning of the memoir, Eliza admits that she is looking for a lover but it is not love that she is seeking: she is looking to the white man for protection despite living in a supposed postfeminist world. Again a stereotype – the helpless Western woman at the mercy of sexist Arab men and misogynist laws - is turned on

its head. Ironically, in the Gulf State, it is the Moslem men who mostly provide Eliza with protection from western men and sharia law works in Eliza's favour.

Furthermore, most of the sexism and treachery Eliza faces in the workplace comes from western men and women, and her drug rapist in Brunei was white and western. Things become a little messier when it is a black **western** man who harasses, stalks and verbally abuses Eliza in the Gulf State and it is the Arabs who offer her the opportunity to have him lashed under sharia law, tapping into a hierarchy of racism rather than the white/black binary opposition. Unlike some other protagonists, Eliza does not strive to be an honorary man exhibiting traditionally masculine behaviours battling the dual front of paternalism. While her western knowledge and experience were generally respected, it was her multi-layered status as western women, representing both majority culture (western) and minority culture (female), and so called 'feminine' skills such as collaboration and parity, that helped to avoid triggering the victim mentality of Arab Moslem men who fear being dismissed as inferior possibly because most interpretations of the Qur'an emphasize the superiority of men over women. As such, there was little place for binary oppositions in the complex, multi-faceted, ever-shifting space that Eliza occupied when working in the Gulf State.

While acutely cognizant, as far as a white western woman can be, of the multi-layered and additive oppressions faced by black women, I have explored the notion that white western women, particularly those who are marginalized, provide a point in cross-cultural and postcolonial situations upon which a variety of forces converge in confusion and sometimes violence. This may be attributed to the significant change in status of the white western woman over the last four decades. However, I assert that the size and solidity of the change has been over-estimated and white western women still face oppressions and injustices that have been largely hidden by the smokescreen of pro-sex, commodity and anti-victimization postfeminist spin encouraged and supported by the forces of neo-capitalism through the media. While acknowledging that preoccupation with victim narratives can be counterproductive as catalysts for change, I consider that the rebranding of women's pain into empowerment as also counterproductive. It belies the deep damage done to some women, particularly those who have been raped, and marginalizes those whose spirit has been irredeemably crushed. Surely women can be allowed to dance back with an ever so slight limp in their memoirs. Consequently, I challenge the extent to which

white western women are supposed to enjoy white western privilege and particularly the accompanying white western female guilt, self-sacrifice and silencing that can allow men from minority cultures to get away with sexual crimes against women.

Of all the feminist views I have read and reflected on during my research in the past three years, the words of Owen, Stein and Vande Berg endorse my position most fully. Evoking Judith Butler's significant work of the mid 1990s, *Bodies That Matter*, Owen et al writes in 2007:

*Feminism matters. It matters that we tell stories and write histories about the mothers. It matters that future generations of girls and women have access to a diverse range of stories about female lives. It matters that we safeguard the hard won liberties that women now enjoy: reproductive rights, equal opportunity, employment ... We are a groundswell human rights organization: we go where the women are: we help all people who suffer inequality ... we work for justice and peace: we work to preserve the environment. It matters that even as we enjoy the benefits of a capital economy, we never let the comforts obscure our vision for equity, peace, and a stable environment. It matters that we are not taken in by the slick smugness of smirking deconstruction.*

*Feminism? It matters. (Owen, et al., 2007, p. 244)*

Drawing on the argument of the intrinsic worth, dignity and spirit of all human beings, I strongly believe that injustice perpetrated against **any** woman, regardless of race, cultural or historical context, matters.



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