

Serene Khader

*Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*

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*Reviewed by Ranjoo S. Herr, 2019*

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Serene Khader's book, *Decolonizing Universalism*, is the first book-length treatment of transnational feminism by a feminist philosopher. Its "overarching argument" is that feminism, despite its universalist opposition to sexist oppression, does not require a universal adoption of Western or "Enlightenment liberal" values advocated by "missionary feminism (MF)." The reasons are twofold: First, feminist praxis does not require "a single cultural blueprint to have normative bite," as "feminism's true normative core" lies in opposing sexist oppression. Indeed, diverse social and cultural forms are compatible with feminism understood in this way. Second, Western feminists have often lost sight of the feminist normative core—opposition to sexist oppression—as a result of blindly embracing Western values, predicated on the idea of moral progress as transcending traditional values and unchosen relationships and requiring economic independence. "Putatively" feminist values—such as individualism, autonomy, and gender eliminativism—have in fact contributed to the spread of imperialism in their justificatory and constitutive roles (3–5).

Khader's book has five chapters in which she fleshes out her overarching argument. Chapter 1 is the most central chapter in which she develops her own position in opposition to MF. She characterizes the latter as a brand of universal feminism that stems from ethnocentrism (or, more precisely, Westocentrism), justice monism, and idealizing and moralizing ways of seeing that promote Western values as universal. Although few Western feminists would explicitly endorse this view, Khader continues, these presuppositions "lie in the background" of many Western feminists' and activists' attitudes on Western feminist interventions (22). Although Khader rejects MF, she wishes to retain universalism. As a superior universal feminist alternative to MF, Khader advances her "nonideal universalist" feminism based on the conception of feminism as "opposition to sexist oppression" *à la bell hooks* (37). Khader is aware of the intersectionality of diverse oppressions that "other" women face, yet she argues that feminists ought to distinguish between "what would improve individual women's lives from what would reduce sexist oppression" and prioritize the latter. The reason, according to Khader, is that strategies that resist oppressions other than sexism can only be in the women's "short-term interests" (17).

In contrast to MF's false universalism that masks ethnocentrism, Khader argues, her universalist feminism is compatible with "multiple culturally specific ways of living gender" (38). Faulting MF's failures in its adherence to Western gender-justice ideals, Khader rejects any "thick" universal ideal of gender justice (12) whose content may be "decided more by Western and

Northern self-representations and interests than by genuine empirical engagement, intercultural dialogue, and attention to what ‘other’ women actually need” (11). Her universalist feminism focuses rather on “what is wrong” under nonideal conditions in third-world contexts (38)—hence her emphasis on “nonideal.” Khader argues that her nonideal position can counteract ethnocentric tendencies of MF to promote as universal Western ideals of gender justice and cultural forms in at least two ways: First, her position underdetermines “how gender justice should be brought about in particular cases” (38) by not specifying “the indicators of advantage and disadvantage . . . in any given context” (39); second, it gives “a picture of what is wrong rather than . . . what is right” (38) and thereby focuses on “whether *oppression* is present, not whether certain cultural vernaculars or practices are” (41; original emphasis).

In the following chapters, Khader focuses her attention on how putatively feminist values endorsed by MF—such as individualism, autonomy, and gender eliminativism—have contributed to the spread of imperialism. In chapter 2, Khader reexamines Susan Okin’s infamous multicultural “ultimatum” that women in nonliberal cultures might be better off if their own cultures were “to become extinct.” This ultimatum is predicated on an underlying conception of individualism—“independence individualism”—which revolves around the Western values of economic self-sufficiency and “chosen relationships.” Independence individualism is “imperialism-complicit” and “impedes transnational feminist praxis” (8).

Chapter 3 discusses how the idea of autonomy, often conceptualized as “freedom from tradition” or “Enlightenment freedom (EF),” has contributed to imperialism. For example, Western feminists who subscribe to EF have been complicit in Islamophobia. The bulk of the chapter, however, is devoted to exploring the feminist limit in accommodating other women’s “metaphysically traditionalist (MT)” worldviews. In particular, Khader claims that Saba Mahmood is “wrong” to respect the voices of Egyptian pietist women who unquestioningly accept their MT dictates (90). Yet, Khader continues, feminists ought not to reject all MT worldviews depending on their “effects” (93); those that have “normatively acceptable effects” (97)—meaning, conducive to feminism as opposition to sexist oppression—are compatible with feminism, whereas those that are not, such as Egyptian pietist women’s worldview, are not.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the value of “gender-role eliminativism” advocated by Western feminists and its relation to non-Western views about women’s gender role. Although Western gender-role eliminativism is not necessarily a feminist value, “headship-complementarian (HC)” worldviews embraced by “other” women should be rejected as incompatible with feminist “ideals.” The HC worldview advocates women specializing in household labor and deferring to men’s authority because this is conducive to “women’s own well-being” (104). High-caste Oriya Hindu women’s and the Jamaat-e-Islami women’s positions are given as examples. By deploying Okin’s analysis of asymmetrical vulnerability, however, Khader argues that HC gender roles cannot be constitutive of a gender-just ideal because they involve “intra-household-inequality-supportive norms and practices,” which result in unequal resource allocation within households (106).

In contrast, Khader argues in chapter 5 that some non-Western constructions of “feminized power”—power “exercised through women’s fulfillment of prescribed gender roles” (122)—are defensible feminist strategies. Leila Ahmed’s defense of the harem and Nkiru Nzegwu’s defense

of a gender-differentiated public are given as examples. Western feminists dismiss “other” women’s advocacy of feminized power by idealizing Western feminist ideals and cultural norms (122). This is unacceptable, however, as “other” women’s advocacy of feminized power is a form of resistance in nonideal conditions meant to bring about incremental change (133).

Transnational feminism has been a major preoccupation among feminists since the publication of Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s *Scattered Hegemonies* in the mid-1990s, and its influence has only increased over time (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Yet feminist philosophers have been relatively silent on this topic, although some have offered helpful philosophical analyses of key concepts at the article level. Khader’s book is significant and exciting in that it is the first monograph on transnational feminism by a feminist philosopher. As a fellow anti-imperial feminist philosopher committed to constructing a universal normative theory fit for transnational feminist praxis (Herr 2014; 2018), I welcome Khader’s philosophical treatment of some of the most important questions for feminism in the twenty-first century. Khader’s “ambitious” aim to identify “the core values of transnational feminist praxis” (13) is awe-inspiring. I agree wholeheartedly with her that such core values must enable anti-imperial feminists to criticize “gender injustice without prescribing imperialism” (2). Khader is spot on in identifying an important first step in this direction: Anti-imperial feminists must recognize that Western feminism has been “informed by unstated background assumptions” entrenched in liberalism (14) and forge transnational feminist solidarity by engaging “with ‘other’ traditions and practices” (16).

After a careful reading of the book, however, I’m concerned that Khader’s nonideal universalist feminism may not live up to her professed goals of anti-imperial feminism. I focus on five aspects of her theory as areas of concern: First, targeting missionary feminism (MF); second, her use of the term “other” to refer to third-world women; third, her brand of universalism; fourth, her insistence on the primacy of opposing sexist oppression in the global context; and fifth, her position toward “other” women’s agency.

First, Khader targets MF as representative of imperialist Western feminism. Although I agree that MF, as is conceptualized by Khader, is problematic, I’m puzzled by the significance that Khader attributes to MF in the year 2018. MF was a popular view held by Western feminists in the 70s and 80s, which consequently prompted severe critiques by feminists of color within the Western context. Although some prominent Western feminists—such as Okin—advocated it until early 2000, Western feminism has evolved considerably since then. I agree with Khader that certain presuppositions of MF continue to “lie in the background” of many Western feminists’ treatment of third-world women, although “few Western feminists would explicitly endorse this view” (22). Under these circumstances, I would have liked more examples of how such presuppositions continue to operate implicitly and propagate imperialism in the more current Western feminist literature. Instead, Khader’s critique targets mainly MF construed by other feminists in the early 2000s (Abu-Lughod 2002) or Okin’s position, whose flaws have been amply discussed by other feminist philosophers (Flax 1995; Herr 2004; Jaggar 2009).

Second, Khader’s reference to third-world women as “other” women in her anti-imperial feminist book seems inappropriate. Khader’s reasons for choosing this term are twofold: to “capture both the decline in the use of the term” and to reflect the fact “that women who are

perceived as culturally ‘other’ now live throughout the West” (19). Neither of her reasons, however, seems to justify her choice of the nondescript term “other” to refer to third-world women, which not only erases differences among them, but also disturbingly conjures up the imperial and/or colonial gaze toward those conquered and/or colonized.<sup>1</sup>

Third, Khader’s nonideal universalist feminism may not be as compatible with “multiple culturally specific ways of living gender” (38) as she seems to think. The qualifier “nonideal,” which is supposed to do the heavy lifting in distinguishing her universalism from the ethnocentric universalism of MF, is left largely untheorized (36). This is a problem, as the debate concerning “nonideal” theories in recent decades, particularly in opposition to Rawls’s “ideal” theory, has involved conceptual confusions due to misconstruing Rawls’s position (Simmons 2010; Stemplowska and Swift 2012). Rawls’s ideal theory is not an idle philosophical speculation irrelevant to nonideal conditions; rather it is a “necessary precursor” to nonideal theory (Stemplowska and Swift 2012, 376) by serving as “the only basis for providing the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems” (Rawls 1999, 8). If this is correct, then universalism cannot be easily categorized as either “ideal” or “nonideal,” as if ideals can be divorced from universal theories. Indeed, gender-justice ideals are constitutive of any plausible theory of universal feminism and bound to influence its contour whether they are explicitly recognized as such or not.

Although Khader explicitly abjures universal gender-justice ideals, therefore, her nonideal universalist feminism seems predicated on a particular conception of universal gender-justice ideals. For example, although Khader urges feminists not to specify the indicators of advantage and disadvantage in a given context because “societies genuinely vary in their currencies of advantage,” she states in the immediately following paragraph that “anti-imperialist feminists should not completely embrace nonspecificity about indicators of advantage” (39). There is, according to Khader, a need for a “list of universal indicators of advantage and disadvantage” that is not “abstracted from a specific culture.” Such a list is presumably needed to serve as a universal standard of gender justice by which to critically assess women’s activism on the ground.

Further, regarding what counts as such a list, Khader claims that the “list of basic human rights” in prevailing human-rights discourse is the “closest available thing” (40). Given that the list of individual human rights is clearly based on liberal values (Beitz 2001; Pogge 2002; Griffin 2008; Buchanan 2013; Donnelly 2013), and many prominent theorists have criticized this list as Westocentric (Pollis and Schwab 1979; Cobbah 1987; Ames 1997; Brown 1999; Mutua 2001; Kennedy 2002; Hafner-Burton and Ron 2009), it is curious that Khader views it to be “abstracted from a specific culture” and assumes it as universal rather than seriously engaging with these critiques.<sup>2</sup> Hence I worry that Khader’s universalist feminism may be a variation of Westocentric feminism, which subscribes to a universal gender-justice ideal whose content is “decided more by Western and Northern self-representations and interests than by genuine empirical engagement, intercultural dialogue, and attention to what ‘other’ women actually need” (11).

Fourth, Khader insists that anti-imperial feminist theorizing about third-world women’s activism must focus on sexist oppression. Feminism as “opposition to sexist oppression” may be a fine definition of feminism in the abstract, but what counts as “sexist oppression” cannot be

determined independently of specific cultural contexts. Therefore, I worry that Khader's insistence on prioritizing sexist oppression in the global context may misrepresent third-world women's activism, which often do not involve an explicit demand for gender equality or feminist goals. Third-world women tend to advocate gradual changes that result from their collaboration with their male counterparts in local social movements, such as nationalist, pro-democracy, or human-rights movements, to enhance their communal influence vis-à-vis other members, and to improve the living standards of their families and of the community itself. Even in these mixed activism, however, "women ultimately take up questions of gender inequality even if this was not their initial objective" (Basu 1995, 19). Under these circumstances, whether a particular third-world women's activism is feminist or not is not easy for an outsider to determine, as the contours of social and political landscapes on the ground are dense and complex. Khader at times seems to agree, as when she states that "One cannot know whether sexist oppression is present in a given case without [having] rich contextual information" (41). Unfortunately, if this is true, then Khader is wrong to categorically prioritize "sexist oppression" over other oppressions in third-world contexts without the benefit of "rich contextual information."

Finally, I'm concerned about a particularly paradoxical aspect of Khader's anti-imperial feminism regarding third-world women's agency. Khader claims that feminist questions are not likely to be resolved by "concern with agency," as "It is possible to be fully agentic and to also perpetuate one's own (or others') oppression." Since feminism requires "opposition to oppression, not just the ability to make meaning and act in ways one cares about in the world," Khader continues, "respect for [third-world women's] agency is an insufficient feminist normative commitment" (p. ref.). According to this logic, even if third-world women are satisfied with progress they've made regarding their agency, transnational feminists in the West ought to take a step further and promote "women's emancipation or gender justice" rather than "merely agency" of third-world women (18). Such statements seem to presume superior epistemic or cognitive capacities for transnational feminists based in the West in making more reliable judgments about third-world women's oppression than the women themselves make. It is disturbingly reminiscent of Okin's statement that "committed outsiders can often be better analysts and critics of social injustice than those who live within the relevant culture" (Okin 1994, 19). Not only is this presumption morally suspect, but it also contradicts Khader's claim about the importance of "genuine empirical engagement, intercultural dialogue, and attention to what 'other' women actually need" in her feminism.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, Khader's timely and ambitious book raises more questions than provides answers about key topics of feminism in the twenty-first century. Despite its limitations, it may serve the valuable purpose of bringing attention to and fostering constructive debates on critical and urgent feminist mandates of anti-imperialism, universal feminism, and transnational feminist solidarity in an unprecedentedly globalized world.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons to continue to use the term “third-world” despite the decline in its usage, see Dotson et al. 2017. More important, Khader’s second reason does not seem relevant in the context of her book, which is about women living in third-world contexts.

<sup>2</sup> One exception is Makao Mutua’s critique (Mutua 2001), whose name Khader misspells as “Matua.” Yet not only is Mutua’s critique taken out of context, but it is misinterpreted as involving “nonnormative assumptions surrounding Western transcendence” (40).

<sup>3</sup> Khader’s conceptualization of her “anti-imperial” feminism as comprising “postcolonial, transnational, and decolonial feminist positions” (19) is consistent with a dismissive attitude toward “other” women’s agency, as it excludes third-world feminism, which views third-world

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women as “active agents of positive change” whose “viewpoints must receive due respect” from Western feminists (Herr 2014, 6).