Who is the ‘Other’?: A Postmodern Feminist Critique of Women and Development Theory and Practice

Jane L. Parpart

ABSTRACT

In the last decade poststructural and postmodern critiques have increasingly dominated the world of scholarship. The grand theories of the past have been called into question; universals have been overtaken by particularities and difference. Feminist scholars have reacted to postmodernism in a number of ways. Some reject it outright, while others call for a synthesis of feminist and postmodern approaches. Many scholars and activists concerned with Third World issues, especially poverty and development, have rejected both feminism and postmodernism, dismissing them as First World preoccupations, if not indulgences. This article seeks to explore the relevance of postmodern feminism for Third World problems and analysis, particularly its utility for theorists and practitioners concerned with issues of women and development.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is not easily encapsulated in one phrase or idea, but is rather an amalgam of ideas put forward by a number of scholars. I will try to summarize the main themes, recognizing that I am no doubt over-simplifying many of them. On the widest level of abstraction, postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard have questioned the assumptions of the modern age, particularly the belief that reason and scientific enquiry can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation for knowledge, and that reason itself has transcendental and universal qualities. The postmodernists challenge the notion that concepts such as knowledge, justice and beauty can be evaluated and established as universally correct. They

argue that the hegemonic metanarratives of both Enlightenment and Marxist thought, rather than reflecting a universal reality, are embedded in the specific historical time and place in which they were created and are associated with certain political baggage. Rather than explain all reality, these metanarratives are privileged discourses that deny and silence competing discourses. Lyotard dismisses universalist claims, arguing that metadiscourse is simply one discourse among others. He insists that postmodern criticism must abandon the modern search for universals, and instead should float free of universal theoretical formulations, becoming more pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual and local (Lyotard, 1984).

Michel Foucault, one of the leading postmodern thinkers, has emphasized the inadequacies of metanarratives and the need to examine the specificities of power and its relation to knowledge. He dismisses 'reason' as born from chaos and 'truth' as simply an error transformed into fixity in the long process of history. According to Foucault, the false power of hegemonic knowledge can be challenged by alternative discourses which offer other explanations of reality. He argues that discourse — a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs (Scott, 1988: 35) — is the site where meanings are contested and power relations determined. The ability to control knowledge and meaning, not only through writing, but also through disciplinary and professional institutions, and in social relations, is the key to understanding power relations in society. Power is diffused through society rather than located in the state, and thus has to be understood in this much broader context (Foucault, 1972, 1976, 1980).

Postmodern and poststructural concern with discourse and language has spawned an interest in the construction of identity and the concept of difference. The search to understand the construction of social meanings has led scholars to recognize the importance of difference. Dominant meanings are often created through comparison with an 'other' which then defines both itself and the dominant reality. According to Jacques Derrida (1976), western philosophy rests on binary opposites, such as truth/falsity, unity/diversity or man/woman, whereby the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite (other). These definitions are as embedded in their opposites as they are in the nature of the object being defined.

This emphasis on dualities and difference has led Derrida and his
followers to call for a dismantling or deconstruction of meaning/discourse. They argue that meanings must be analysed in the way they are constructed and used, particularly in the case of binary opposites. This approach has inspired the critical deconstruction of texts in order to discover a new, more fundamental understanding of the way difference is constructed and used. It rejects universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena, arguing that these definitions essentialize reality and fail to reveal the complexity of life as a lived experience. Derrida calls for an exploration of 'odd turns of phrase, silences, unguarded details, and contradictions in texts overlooked by traditional notions of meaning, identity, and authorial intentions' (Prakash, 1992: 172). This approach emphasizes local, specific and historically informed analysis of different realities, the importance of difference and the pitfalls of universalizing essentialism (Derrida, 1976; Culler, 1982).

Feminism/Postmodernism

Feminists have responded to postmodern ideas in a number of ways. The strongest opposition has come from feminists working in the liberal (modern) or Marxist traditions. Liberal feminists, who have been preoccupied with policy formulation and the improvement of women's status within the structures of western thought and society, generally write as if postmodern critiques have little or no applicability for their own work. This is particularly true of the many reports on the status of women churned out by established institutions, universities, government bureaucracies and international agencies such as the United Nations, the World Bank (see their Staff Working Papers, Country Studies and Technical Papers) and the ILO (also see Joekes, 1987; Gillespie, 1989). The possibility that 'modernization' and 'progress' may be unobtainable goals in a postmodern world has rarely been considered, much less articulated, by liberals working within these structures.

Marxist feminists have also expressed considerable opposition to postmodern ideas. Sylvia Walby argues that 'postmodernism in social theory has led to the fragmentation of the concepts of sex, race and class and to the denial of the pertinence of overarching theories of patriarchy, racism and capitalism. . . . [The postmodern critique of grand theory] is a denial of significant structuring of power, and leads to mere empiricism' (Walby, 1990: 2).
Although more guarded in her assessment of postmodernism, particularly the focus on difference, Nancy Hartsock’s analysis of Foucault leads her to the conclusion that, despite his stated preference for resistant discourse, his thought is deeply embedded in the dominant perspective. As a result, while he has plenty to say about the individual perception and experience of power, ‘systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from Foucault’s account of power’ (Hartsock, 1990: 165; also see Dubois, 1991). Foucault’s is ‘a world in which passivity or refusal represent the only possible choices. Resistance rather than transformation dominates his thinking and consequently limits his politics’ (Hartsock, 1990: 167). This is a position which Hartsock refuses to adopt.  

The political implications of a postmodern feminist perspective have concerned feminists of various persuasions. Linda Hutcheon (1989: 168) argues that postmodernism threatens feminism’s transformative agenda: ‘Postmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of resistance that would correspond to the feminist ones.’ Thus, according to her, it has nothing to add and much to detract from feminist political agendas. Susan Bordo speaks for many feminists when she worries that postmodernism’s focus on difference is leading to political fragmentation and the dissipation of feminist consciousness and activism. Indeed, she believes ‘feminism stands less in danger of the “totalizing” tendencies of feminists than of an increasingly paralyzing anxiety over falling (from what grace?) into ethnocentrism or “essentialism”’ (Bordo, 1990: 142; also see DiStefano, 1991).

Some feminists argue that feminist theory has always dealt with ‘postmodern’ issues and indeed, has more to offer than male-centric postmodern writers. Mascia-Lees et al., for example, point out the profoundly sexist nature of most postmodern anthropology which largely ignores feminist contributions and critiques. They see postmodernism as an attempt to stave off the loss of western male power ‘by questioning the basis of the truths that they are losing the privilege to define’, and argue that feminism, with its openly political stance and its grounding in actual differences among women, has more to offer to both anthropology and the search for sexual justice (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989). Sandra Harding (1990) has argued along similar lines (also see Tress, 1988).

However, a number of feminists have sought a middle ground in relation to postmodern thought. While agreeing that postmodernism, taken to its logical extreme and as practised by its mostly white
middle-class male proponents, appears to undermine feminists’ search for a better, more egalitarian world, some feminists (particularly, Linda Nicholson, Nancy Fraser, Joan Scott, Moya Lloyd, Dana Haraway, Chris Weedon and Jane Flax) believe that postmodernism can contribute to feminist theorizing and action — not by uncritically incorporating postmodern thought into feminism, but rather by developing a postmodern feminist perspective.

One of the most appealing aspects of postmodernism to many feminists has been its focus on difference. The notion that women have been created and defined as ‘other’ by men has long been argued and explored by feminists, most notably Simone de Beauvoir (1952). She challenged male definitions of woman and called on women to define themselves outside the male/female dyad. Women, she urged, must be the subject rather than the object (other) of analysis. This concern was echoed and expanded by other feminists, particularly those calling for the recovery of women’s voices and the development of knowledge from the standpoint of women (Harding, 1987).

However, the concern with women as ‘other’ emanated largely from the writings of white western middle-class women, whose generalizations were grounded for the most part in their own experience. Feminist theory ‘explained’ women as if the reality of white western middle-class women applied to women from all classes, races and regions of the world. Feminist concern with female ‘otherness’ ignored the possibility of differences among women themselves (Gilligan, 1982; Spelman, 1990).

Not surprisingly, the postmodern focus on difference has offered ammunition to women who felt excluded. Black and Native women in North America and Europe have become increasingly vocal about their unique problems, and the need to incorporate race and culture as well as class and gender into feminist analysis. While minority feminists have been arguing for some time for a racially and ethnically specific feminism (Lorde, 1984; Anzaldua, 1990; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1990), postmodernism has provided a space which legitimizes the search for ‘the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed black people’ (hooks, 1984: 25). Bell hooks eloquently argues for a black postmodernism where difference and otherness can be used to explore the realities of the black experience in North America and the connection between that experience and critical thinking. Only then, she argues, will feminism truly incorporate difference into its analysis (hooks, 1984, 1991; also see

A number of Third World feminists have taken up this argument. They have accused western scholars of creating Third World women as an undifferentiated 'other', oppressed by both gender and Third World underdevelopment. Chandra Mohanty has analysed the writings on Third World women by a number of western feminists and concluded that they:

... colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular 'third-world woman' — an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse... assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world. (Mohanty, 1988: 62-3)

Third World women are presented as uniformly poor, powerless and vulnerable, while western women are the referent point for modern, educated, sexually liberated womanhood. This analysis both distorts women's multiple realities and reduces the possibility of coalitions among (usually white) western feminists and working-class and feminist women of colour around the world. While recognizing the important contribution of postmodern feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, who have revealed the peripheral nature of women in western humanist discourse, Mohanty quite rightly reminds us that western feminists have equally ignored and marginalized Third World women in their own discourse (Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty et al., 1991). Aihwa Ong puts it rather more bluntly, arguing that 'For feminists looking overseas, the non-feminist Other is not so much patriarchy as the non-Western woman' (Ong, 1988: 80).

The tendency to essentialize Third World women does not just occur in the writings of western women. It is also present in some of the work of Third World women trained in western institutions, particularly when writing for a western audience. For example, Marnia Lazreg discovered that both western and western-trained scholars writing on Algeria often uncritically adopt western stereotypes about Arab peoples and culture, particularly the primacy of Islam, which is seen as a self-contained and flawed belief system impervious to change. Arab women are presented as passive
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pawns, trapped in a world dominated by hopelessly outdated and retrogressive religious traditions. The Islamic world is characterized as in inexorable decline: progress for Arab women can only come from the adoption of modern western values. Feminist theory, when applied to Arab women, is often seen as an opportunity to enlarge liberal feminist knowledge rather than as a chance to explore the variety of modes of being female. Lazreg calls for a new approach, one that recognizes difference and accepts the need to explore the concrete, lived experiences of women in different cultures. It requires studies of Third World women which reveal women's lives 'as meaningful, coherent and understandable instead of being infused “by us” with doom and sorrow' (Lazreg, 1988: 98). To keep difference from becoming mere division, she believes indigenous scholars must take on a double burden. They must work toward an epistemological break with the prevailing paradigm while also re-evaluating the structure of gender relations in their own societies (Lazreg, 1988; also see Schick, 1990; Spivak, 1990).

These critiques have inspired considerable soul-searching among western feminists, and have encouraged an openness to difference and a reluctance to essentialize 'woman' that bodes well for global feminist understanding. The writings emerging in this vein (Spelman, 1990; Eisenstein and Jardine, 1988) draw heavily on postmodern thought, particularly the focus on language and subjugated knowledges. They reveal a sensitivity to social, historical and cultural specificity (Weedon 1987), a focus on the body as a locus of social control (Jaggar and Bordo, 1989) and a commitment to uncovering previously ignored voices and resistances.

Is the adoption of a postmodern feminist perspective endangering feminist politics? A number of feminists argue the opposite. Rather than accept Hartsock's assertion that Foucault undermines political action, Scott sees his pessimism

... as a warning against simple solutions to difficult problems, as advising human actors to think strategically and more self-consciously about the philosophical and political implications and programs they endorse... Foucault's work provides an important way of thinking differently (and perhaps more creatively) about the the politics of the contextual construction of social meanings, about such organizing principles for political action as 'equality' and 'difference'. (Scott, 1988: 36)

Moya Lloyd finds Foucault's focus on the specificity and multiplicity of power useful for understanding the way women experience
and wield power, and suggests that a postmodernist feminism ‘does not necessarily represent a post-feminism, but alternatively, can affirm feminist politics in their plural, multivocal, fluid, oft-changing hue’ (Lloyd, 1991b: 5).

While few feminists argue for a wholesale adoption of postmodernism, some are searching for a postmodern feminist perspective. Fraser and Nicholson, who are in the vanguard of this move, emphasize the similarities and compatibilities of feminist and postmodern thought. Both, they argue, have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings. While postmodernism has focused on the philosophical side of the problem, feminists have been more concerned with political questions. As a result, Fraser and Nicholson believe the two approaches complement each other. ‘Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism’ (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 20). Much of their work and that of other scholars has been preoccupied with creating a feminist-postmodern alliance which combines ‘a postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism’. This approach, they argue, would encourage recognition of differences and ambiguities without sacrificing the search for a ‘broader, richer, more complex, and multilayered feminist solidarity, the sort of solidarity which is essential for overcoming the oppression of women in its “endless variety and monotonous similarity”’ (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 34, 35).

POSTMODERNISM, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

Does this debate have anything to offer theorists and practitioners concerned with the problems of women’s development in the Third World? I think it does, particularly for those who write and work within the dominant development paradigm. The liberal approach to development grew out of the post-war period of the 1940s, when western thinkers and policy-makers assumed that Third World peoples could gradually, but steadily, be helped to achieve political and economic systems similar to those in the industrialized world. Development was seen as a linear process, in which a nation or
people proceeded from underdevelopment, which was characterized as backward/traditional/primitive, to full development, which was identified as modern/rational/industrialized. The rationale for proceeding along this path was provided by European imperialism, which had fostered the assumption that everything European was superior to any aspect of Third World life. This sense of difference and superiority was enshrined in a colonial discourse that compared Third World peoples and cultures unfavourably with ‘progressive’ western societies (Said, 1978; Curtin, 1974), and called for global modernization.

The problem of development became one of bringing ‘backward’ colonial peoples into the modern (i.e. developed) world. This was seen more as a logistical problem — how to go about it, how quickly it could be achieved, etc. — than as a goal that might itself be questioned. Economists like Rostow (1960) developed models explaining the ‘how’ of development, and development experts set about trying to bring Third World societies to the ‘take off’ stage where modernization could be assured (Escobar, 1984–85; Moore, 1992). The validity of the development project, i.e. making the world modern, was never in dispute.

Third World women, if they were considered at all, were seen as an impediment to development. Colonial discourse represented Third World women ‘as exotic specimens, as oppressed victims, as sex objects or as the most ignorant and backward members of “backward” societies’ (de Groot, 1991: 115). During the colonial period, missionaries, colonial officials and settlers put forward a blend of information, imagination, pragmatic self-interest and prejudice to explain why Third World women were inferior beings, bound by tradition, either unable or unwilling to enter the modern world. Development planners adopted these assumptions uncritically, regarding Third World women as an important block to modernity and thus to development. Consequently, development theory and practice in the first two postcolonial decades (1950s and 1960s) ignored women on the assumption that they would eventually be forced to adopt a more ‘progressive’ stance towards development once the modernization process had been set in motion and Third World men had learned how to organize their societies along modern lines (Afshar, 1991).

As a result, plans were designed on the assumption that productive work was performed entirely by men. Women as workers, owners or entrepreneurs were totally ignored, apart from the
gratuitous admission that women produced future labourers and thus had a role to play in population policy (Hirschmann, 1958). These assumptions reflected western patriarchal patterns of ownership, work and control, which, although assuming western women were 'modern', in the sense of developed, still relegated them to a subordinate role in society, particularly in regard to economic and political matters.

By the late 1960s some economists began to realize that development was not taking place as easily as they had hoped; a number of scholars were particularly concerned by the continuing under-development of Third World women. Ester Boserup's landmark study (1970) proved that development schemes, rather than improving the lives of Third World women, had often deprived them of economic opportunities and status. Modernization had removed women from their traditional productive functions, particularly in agriculture, where they had generally played a crucial role as food producers. Boserup appealed to development planners and policymakers to recognize and account for women's roles in economic development. Only then, she argued, would development occur in the Third World. Other development experts joined her, and in 1973 the Percy Amendment to the United States Foreign Assistance Act enshrined the principle that US development assistance should try to improve the status of Third World women by integrating them into the development process (Mueller, 1987).

A new subfield emerged entitled 'Women in Development' (WID) with its own language and preoccupations. Drawing on liberal feminist thinking in the west, with its call to integrate women into male power structures, WID specialists initially sought women's equality through improved access to education, employment and material benefits such as land and credit. While tolerated by male development planners, these early WID experts were fairly marginal to the development process (Moser, 1989; Buvinic et al., 1983).

WID's status within the development community was enhanced by a number of global changes. Development planners were becoming increasingly aware of the population crisis, the failure of the trickle-down approach to development and the need to reach the poorest of the poor. The focus shifted to supplying basic needs, especially to the poor. Since women were crucial for population control and also disproportionately represented among the poor, they became a legitimate object of concern for policy-makers and development planners. The United Nations declared 1975 to 1985
the Decade for the Advancement of Women, which was inaugurated by a world meeting in Mexico City. Women were put on the development agenda, and obstacles to women's progress were identified. Research on women increased and professional WID experts gained status in the development bureaucracy (Maguire, 1984; Mueller, 1987).

WID policy remained squarely within the modernization paradigm, but with an important difference. Equity issues fell by the wayside as planners emphasized basic human needs, particularly for health, education and training, which they argued would increase women's effectiveness and productivity at work, thus assisting both economic development and women's lives. Reduced fertility would be a side benefit. Planners also called for more credit, greater access to land, legal reform and for more female involvement in development planning. As a USAID report on women in development put it, 'a focus on the economic participation of women in development is essential' (USAID, 1982: 1). However, this approach never challenged gender hierarchies. It ignored the possibility that women's development might require fundamental social change. Development for Third World women meant becoming more western, more modern, not challenging that world-view.

WID policy-makers and planners focused on modernizing Third World women, not on understanding their lives and experiences. Most WID specialists believed Third World women's problems and solutions bore no relation to the struggles and concerns of western feminists, which were seen as entirely unrelated to the more practical concerns of development. The clash between western feminists and Third World women at the Wellesley College conference on women and international development in 1977, reinforced WID specialists' belief in their unique capacity to analyse and solve the problems of Third World women (Papanek, 1986; Maguire, 1984; Stamp, 1989).

This division narrowed somewhat during the 1980s. The 1985 Nairobi Conference celebrating the end of the UN Decade for Women encouraged contacts and better understanding between feminists world-wide. It provided a springboard for South-South linkages among women, including the creation of an international organization, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), which grew out of discussions in India before the conference. DAWN has continued to organize and deliberate on development issues of concern to Third World women. The group has published a book which emphasizes the importance of listening
to and learning from women's diverse experiences and knowledge, and of maintaining a commitment to long-range strategies dedicated to breaking down the structures of inequity between genders, classes and nations (Sen and Grown, 1987).

The Nairobi conference also facilitated dialogue between some Third World and western feminists, particularly those working within the socialist-feminist framework. Links between these groups had been growing rather tentatively in North America, and rather more surely in Europe, but they received a boost at Nairobi. DAWN members had been influenced by the writings of socialist-feminists (Beneria and Sen, 1981) and the deliberations of the Sussex workshops on the subordination of women (Young et al., 1981). This perspective, with its commitment to understanding class and gender inequalities in a global context, provided an intellectual meeting point for some western and Third World feminists. The resulting dialogue has enriched our understanding of comparative women's studies and produced some important texts (Robertson and Berger, 1986; Stichter and Parpart, 1988; Agarwal, 1989; Afshar, 1987, 1991).

Gender and development (GAD) research and training has grown as well. The GAD perspective focuses on gender rather than women, particularly the social construction of gender roles and gender relations. 'Gender is seen as the process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally-defined attributes of masculinity and femininity' (Kabeer, 1991: 11). The possibility of transforming gender roles is thus established. This approach also emphasizes the importance of examining the gender division of labour in specific societies, particularly the more invisible aspects of women's productive and reproductive work, and the relation between these labour patterns and other aspects of gender inequality. It looks at the issue of power as it relates to gender and at strategies for empowering women and challenging the status quo (Kabeer, 1991).

While this approach has had considerable influence on academic development discourse, its willingness to consider fundamental social transformation does not sit well with the large donor agencies who prefer government-to-government aid, with its respect for the sovereign rights of member states. Although some government development agencies (most notably the Scandinavians, Dutch and Canadians) and some non-governmental development organiza-
tions have adopted a more gender-oriented approach to women's development, adding gender analysis training to established WID training programmes, this approach has only rarely been integrated into development planning (Moser, 1989). Most development workers and liberal feminists have seen no reason to alter their comfortable belief in the superiority of western values and systems, and the need for global modernization. This position has been buttressed by the economic crisis that has enveloped much of the Third World over the past ten years. The crisis has reinforced stereotypes about Third World underdevelopment and incompetence. Colonial discourse, with its emphasis on Third World inferiority, has re-emerged in the language of the international development agencies. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have offered neoclassical market-oriented solutions in the shape of structural adjustment plans designed to establish western-style economies in the Third World, and based on the assumption that western economic and political systems should be the model for all nations (Bernstein, 1990; Elson, 1991). The recent collapse of most socialist economies has further strengthened this position. Concern to mitigate some of the harsher aspects of these programmes, particularly among the poor, has led to renewed concern for women's welfare. The disproportionately severe impact of structural adjustment on the poor or 'vulnerable groups', which consist largely of women, children, the disabled and the elderly, has preoccupied UNICEF and other UN agencies (Cornia et al., 1987). A report of the Commonwealth Expert Group on Women and Structural Adjustment (1989) advocated special support programmes for women, increased participation of women in decision-making processes and the creation of socially responsible structural adjustment programmes that address social equity as well as economic growth and efficiency. While raising important issues, this language reinforces WID discourse, which represents Third World women as helpless victims trapped by tradition and incompetence in an endless cycle of poverty and despair. The possibility that Third World women (and men) might have skills and strategies to protect themselves rarely surfaces. Third World women are characterized as uniformly poor, inadequately prepared to cope with the current economic crisis and desperately in need of salvation through foreign expertise (also see Kandiyoti, 1990; de Groot, 1991). As a result, WID policy and projects have continued to focus on
the poorest of the poor. Of late, some of the more enlightened development agencies have directed some of their aid to encouraging women's entrepreneurial talents, supporting women's studies at post-secondary institutions and strengthening women's ministries. Although this is a salutary and progressive trend, the amount of money and human resources deployed in this direction pale in comparison with traditional development projects, such as roads, agricultural projects, etc., which continue to be designed for the most part by men for men. Moreover, most development projects for women are still aimed at the poorest women, and are carefully designed with very small-scale goals. Women are taught to make baskets or sew clothes while men are trained to use machinery. Women's projects often seem determined to increase the productivity of women within subsistence agricultural production rather than providing alternative activities which might offer women more economic and personal autonomy (Kandiyoti, 1990). They frequently support economic initiatives while ignoring the need to empower women through collective action (World Bank, 1989).

A POSTMODERN FEMINIST CRITIQUE

The postmodern critique has much to offer those who are critical of development theory and practice. Some Third World and western scholars have drawn on this perspective to challenge the assumption that modernization is necessarily possible or desirable. They have questioned the belief that Third World development and westernization/modernization are synonymous and that western political, social and economic institutions and practices (whether liberal or socialist) hold the answers to the Third World's development problems (Moore, 1992; Escobar, 1984–85; Ferguson, 1985).

Drawing on postmodern conceptions of power and knowledge, particularly the role of discourse in the construction of power/knowledge systems, these scholars argue that development discourse is embedded in the ethnocentric and destructive colonial (and postcolonial) discourses designed to perpetuate existing hierarchies rather than to change them. It has defined Third World peoples as the 'other', embodying all the negative characteristics supposedly no longer found in modern, westernized peoples (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1990; Escobar, 1984–85). These scholars assert the right of a people to their own culture, history and world-view, and argue for a new
form of development, one that is based on the knowledge and needs of Third World peoples rather than the so-called 'expertise' of western (and Third World) development agents. This critique challenges received wisdom about Third World realities and the nature and goals of development: while accepting the importance of economic development, it rejects the adoption of mindless modernity, calling instead for a creative synthesis of tradition and modernity, drawing on local knowledge and culture (Edwards, 1989).

I believe that a postmodern feminist perspective offers similar insights into the women and development enterprise. After all, much of the WID and GAD literature still represents Third World women as benighted and overburdened, helplessly entangled in the tentacles of regressive Third World patriarchy. With the recent economic crisis apparently legitimizing representation of Third World women as victims of retrogressive traditions and economic ineptitude, the poor Third World woman remains truly the 'other' to her development expert sisters (Report of the Commonwealth Group, 1989; Wiltshire, 1988; CIDA, 1986).

Since this discourse legitimizes the assertion that western WID expertise is essential for the development of Third World women, it is not surprising that development projects generally emphasize the importance of acquiring technical skills and equipment that can only be supplied by western educated experts (Edwards, 1989). Moreover, this image of Third World women fits in well with development specialists' tendency to evaluate power solely at the level of the state. Since Third World women have relatively little power at this level, WID experts can see their knowledge of and access to the state as a crucial element in the development enterprise. While the many projects aimed at strengthening women's position in bureaucracies around the world are often quite useful, they generally focus on training personnel in western-oriented public administration techniques rather than looking to local knowledge and experience for guidance.

It is clear, however, that there is much to be learned from Third World women. Development plans based on inadequate knowledge of women's lives and attitudes have consistently failed (Rogers, 1980; Moser, 1989). A postmodern feminist focus, with its critique of the modern and its focus on localized, subjugated knowledge/power systems, would encourage development planners to pay more attention to the concrete circumstances of Third World women's
lives. The desire to understand the lived realities of Third World women would encourage a search for previously silenced women's voices, particularly their interpretation of the world they inhabit, their successes and failures and their desires for change. The goals and aspirations of Third World women would be discovered rather than assumed, and strategies for improving their lives could be constructed on the basis of actual experiences and needs.

The attention to difference encouraged by postmodern feminist thinking also reminds westerners that women in the Third World (or the west) cannot be lumped into one undifferentiated category. The notion of Third World homogeneity, especially among women, may be comforting to WID practitioners, but it is damaging to both understanding and practice. It ignores the intersection of class and gender in the Third World and the need to evaluate that intersection in concrete historical circumstances. As in the west, élite women in the Third World share some experiences with their less advantaged sisters, particularly the constraints of patriarchal values, but many have opportunities to circumvent patriarchy in ways unavailable to the poor. Circumstances can of course change over time — formerly prosperous women in Africa and Latin America are now bearing much of the brunt of the current economic crisis — but the experience of that crisis still varies by class, and those variations need to be recognized.

WID practitioners have generally ignored class and focused on poor women. The socialist-feminist critique of development has been more sensitive to the importance of gender and class, but it has emphasized women's work experience, particularly their unrecorded reproductive labour. While paying lip-service to the importance of gender ideology in a materialist analysis, the socialist-feminist perspective has not been able to provide the tools for investigating the construction of meaning and its dissemination through language which the postmodern feminist approach can offer. I am not suggesting that we abandon the materialist socialist-feminist concern with gender and class, but rather that we add to it a postmodern feminist analysis of discourse, knowledge/power relations and difference.

This more nuanced approach to the construction of gender ideology in Third World societies would assist development planners and scholars of the Third World to understand how gender ideology shapes and limits women's access to knowledge and power in particular societies. Postmodern feminist critiques not only call
into question received ideas about modernization, but also offer new insights into women's lived experiences, particularly the way societies define women's sense of themselves and the limitations of that sensibility for social change and development. Unless we achieve this level of understanding, women and development studies will remain another area of colonization of the South by the North (Wiltshire, 1988). The postmodern feminist focus on difference and discourse offers the possibility of understanding and transcending both western and Third World patriarchal ideologies, without abandoning the search for a more gender equitable world.

A postmodern feminist approach to gender and development has implications for the practice as well as the analysis of development. The tendency of WID practitioners to concentrate on vulnerable women permits them to ignore the existence of many highly-skilled indigenous women in the Third World, women who have much to offer the development process in their own countries (Staudt, 1985). There is a need for much greater awareness of Third World women's organizations and writings on development: DAWN, for example, is a well-organized, articulate movement calling for new approaches to development. While somewhat utopian in approach, the DAWN document reminds us that the development concerns of Third World women are less bound to gender struggle and more embedded in issues of global redistribution and underdevelopment than feminist struggles in the west (Sen and Grown, 1987). This is an important lesson for western feminists, and for development experts, who are apt to equate their own priorities with those of women everywhere in the world.

Right now there is a lot of talk about consultation with Third World women, but very little practice. Western development practitioners may offer consultancies to Third World women and then ignore their suggestions. In the overwhelming number of cases, however, these consultancies go to Third World men, ignoring the expertise of trained Third World women (Wiltshire, 1988; CIDA, 1990). As long as the belief that real expertise can only come from the west persists not only among western WID practitioners, but also among many indigenous experts who have been trained in the west, self-confidence and self-reliance will be destroyed and the possibility that development will lead to the establishment of autonomous self-reliant equitable societies will be undermined.
CONCLUSION

The 'crisis' of development has led some scholars to question the validity of the whole development project; critics of women and development activities voice similar doubts. I believe, however, that much can be gained, both for analysis and practice, by adding a postmodern feminist perspective to the gender and development analysis that has already enriched our understanding of women and development questions. The addition of a postmodern feminist approach brings into question the uncritical acceptance of modernity, it reminds development specialists that power is not exercised solely at the level of the state, and it urges a closer, more localized and specific examination of Third World women's strategies for survival. The recognition of Third World women as persons with their own history, practice and achievements would alter and improve development theory and practice. It would challenge the glib assumption that development equals modernization. Third World women would become the subject rather than the object of WID theory and practice.

An approach to development that recognizes the connection between knowledge and power, and seeks to understand local knowledges both as sites of resistance and power, would provide a more subtle understanding of Third World women's lives. Consequently, it would encourage development specialists to challenge development discourse that represents Third World women as the vulnerable 'other'. It would remind them that women's realities can only be discovered by uncovering the voices and knowledge of the 'vulnerable', and that once that is done, this 'vulnerability' is neither so clear nor so pervasive. Attention to difference, language and resistance provides new insights into Third World peoples' behaviour and undermines the tendency to unthinkingly apply western standards to all Third World societies. Attention to difference and to multiple power/knowledge systems can encourage self-reliance and a belief in one's capacity to act. It cuts through western arrogance about modernity, whether from an Enlightenment or Marxist point of view, and provides the intellectual basis for a new understanding of global diversity.

A postmodern feminist approach recognizes as well that the celebration of difference must not obscure the need for solidarity among all women and the importance of global as well as national and regional political action in defence of women. In this it avoids
the pitfalls of much postmodern thinking, which underestimates or ignores the importance of resistance and political action. An uncritical postmodernism could encourage gender to be seen as endlessly multiple, 'inherently unstable and continually self-deconstructing' (Bordo, 1990: 134). The danger of dissolving into relativity and political paralysis is very real, but a postmodern feminist approach, with its commitment to understanding and resisting global inequalities, provides 'practical spaces for both generalist critique (suitable when gross points need to be made) and attention to complexity and nuance' (Bordo, 1990: 153). A synthesis of this kind, that incorporates postmodern critiques without losing touch with the insights of feminist thinking, particularly radical and socialist-feminist critiques, holds real possibilities for a deeper understanding of women's multiple realities and for struggles to improve the lot of women throughout the world. Such an approach would provide the intellectual underpinnings for global feminist theory and practice, and would offer much to development specialists as well as to those dedicated to understanding and improving the position of women throughout the world.

NOTES

1. I use the term Third World with great trepidation, adopting it as a shorthand for describing three regions of the world — Africa, Latin America and Asia — with the understanding that these areas, while exhibiting certain similarities, have many differences as well. The term is not to be seen as an assumption that Third World peoples, especially women, can be lumped together in one undifferentiated category.

2. Some western scholars, most notably Marxists, reject postmodernism as dangerous and politically naive (Callinicos, 1989; Palmer, 1990). Others, while maintaining their sympathy for Marxism, argue that postmodernism is an outgrowth of the culture of late capitalism, and consequently cannot simply be wished away. Federick Jameson, the most articulate proponent of this position, calls for a cognitive mapping that draws on the strengths of postmodernism without abandoning political action (Jameson, 1991; Li, 1991). Other scholars accept the postmodern emphasis on difference and multiplicity, arguing that it is crucial for their work and not necessarily inimical to other approaches (Prakash, 1992; Ankersmit, 1983, 1990).

3. As Eagleton explains, '“Language” is speech or writing viewed “objectively”', as a chain of signs without a subject. "Discourse" means language grasped as utterance, as involving speaking and writing subjects and therefore also, at least potentially, readers and listeners' (Eagleton, 1983: 115).

4. The postmodern approach has been especially useful for the analysis of non-western history. Indian historiography draws heavily on postmodernism, particularly the study of difference (Guha and Spivak, 1988; Prakash, 1990, 1992; Said, 1978).
5. Indeed, Sabrina Lovibond (1990: 179) argues that feminism 'should persist in seeing itself as a component or offshoot of Enlightenment modernism, rather than as one more "exciting" feature (or cluster of features) in a postmodern landscape'.

6. Nancy Fraser shares many of Hartsock's misgivings, arguing that Foucault calls too many different sorts of things power and simply leaves it at that . . . what Foucault needs, and desperately, are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power' (Fraser, 1989: 32-3).


8. Many feminists who are concerned about the negative political implications of postmodern analysis for feminist action still find Foucault's emphasis on contextual situated analysis useful for their feminist project (Rhode, 1990; Sawicki, 1991; Diamond and Quinby, 1988).

9. Of the many feminists seeking to develop a postmodern feminism some of the most important are: Jane Flax (1990); Kathy Ferguson (1991); Moya Lloyd (1991a, 1991b); Chris Weedon (1987); and Donna Harraway (1990).

10. Some development planners, most notably in non-governmental organizations, drew on dependency theories of the 1970s and radical feminist separatism to argue for separate women-only projects. This approach (known as Women and Development or WAD) emphasized small-scale women-only projects to provide women with some income and autonomy from males (Rathgeber, 1990; Parpart, 1989).

11. The GAD approach has offered development planners a way of differentiating between practical (i.e. specific, daily) gender needs and strategic (or more long-term, empowerment) needs for women. This approach seems to be making some inroads into development thinking and planning. The WID policy passed by CIDA in February 1992 addresses fundamental gender issues and the need to see gender equity as a societal, economic and political matter. This language reflects the absorption of some of the GAD perspective (CIDA, 1992; interview with Sherry Greaves, CIDA WID Unit, Ottawa, 28 February 1992).

12. I am not arguing for an uncritical acceptance of tradition which, after all, is a constantly changing reality and often includes patriarchal practices which inhibit both economic development and gender equity. However, many traditions are important and should be respected and preserved.

13. While the NGOs and development experts adopting a GAD perspective tend to be more sensitive to cultural factors, they too often emphasize Third World women's poverty and vulnerability. A Partnership Africa Canada GAD consultation (1990: 34) for example, expressed concern about the "token" application of GAD within some sections of the NGO community . . . [and worried that] If GAD is presented as a requisite for funding, the "inclusion of women" in projects may continue to be marked by "tokenism" .

14. For example, USAID projects for women in 1991 included Advancing Basic Education and Literacy; Agricultural Marketing Improvement; Economic Policy Reform; Agricultural Training; and Private Enterprise Development Support (USAID, 1991).

15. CIDA has such projects in Indonesia, Zimbabwe, the Philippines and elsewhere. The Commonwealth Secretariat WID office also has many such
projects. I am not suggesting these are unimportant, but rather that they could be improved by drawing on the organizational knowledge that already exists among Third World women at every level of society.

16. CIDA is trying consciously to overcome this problem (CIDA, 1990), as are a number of prominent NGOs. I believe the Scandinavian countries are also trying to address this issue.

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Jane L. Parpart is Professor of History at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 3J5. She is currently working on a book on Feminism, Postmodernism and Development, with Marianne Marchand, as well as a number of articles on women and the construction of class identity in the towns of the Zambian copper belt.