

Ruby Chishti's Free Hugs: Claiming Spaces Through Utopian Feminist Futures

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Chishti's artwork entitled *Free Hugs* (2002), a three-dimensional installation consisting of ten half life-size female fabric sculptures holding each other in what seems like an empathetic embrace. Using textile residues and discards to shape the bodies, this installation creates a unified female experience of unknown futures, grief, loss, and love. Exhibited on the shores of the Hudson River in a public space, these soft sculptures are extremely multivalent. The large sized women of various color not only evoke a transnational feminist experience but also creates a surreal ambiance using the reflection of New York's state of the art skyline in the waters of the Hudson River. The reflection creates a background against which these austere figures made of rags and discarded textile material emphasize the need for claiming spaces through a transnational feminist alliance, respecting nuanced-complexity of female existence against various forms of patriarchal imperialism, capitalism, and neo-colonialism. Extending Spivak's concept of effaced itinerary of third world- female subaltern subject in "Can a Subaltern Speak" (1986), this paper argues that Ruby Chishti's work "free hugs" binds women within a universal but nuanced experience of being silenced within the patriarchal socio-cultural spectrum and calls for a transnational feminist empathy based on respect and equality, and acceptance of cultural, religious and racial differences.

Keywords: Gender, Decolonial Feminism, Feminist Futures

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Introduction

The paper argues that Ruby Chishti's artwork *Free Hugs* (2002) binds women within a universal but nuanced experience of being silenced within the larger patriarchal socio-cultural spectrum and calls for new radical feminist futures. The paper critically re-evaluates the historical center/periphery feminist discourse and reimagines an alternative Utopian feminist liaison, forming a new trajectory that drifts from periphery to center rather than the center to periphery – as it always has been.

The paper utilizes decolonial theory which allows “radically distinct perspectives and possibilities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence,” (Mignolo, & Walsh, 2018). This method is further applied to reinvestigate the “doubly effaced itinerary” of gendered colonial subaltern in Spivak's canonical essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak.” Applying this methodology on three high profile examples of gendered sexual crime related cases represented in the US media, the paper argues that the nuances of silenced gendered subaltern in Spivak's text can be extended universally

Context and Significance

White feminism euphemistically known as mainstream feminism, throughout history has observed documented, and represented periphery/colonial women as universally oppressed, marginalized, and homogenized victims of cultural/religious and familial oppression.

Antoinette Burton In *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture 1865-1915* (1994) looks at the historical *image* construction of British feminists in subcontinent, as the saviors and role models for the underprivileged, subjugated and victimized female Indian subjects. Despite the rhetoric of universal sisterhood, the British women in India represented themselves as the mothers of Indian women, hence endorsing the ontological motivations of imperial projects and creating an epistemological hierarchy between them and the “other women” (Burton, 1994).

Many post-colonial feminists criticized this image construction of the “other women” as Eurocentric, disregarding periphery women's social cultural and historical disadvantages and difference. And also, white women's inability to acknowledge what Bolivian decolonial feminist Aymara Parades call plural patriarchies or patriarchal *entrouque* or junction: that is when imperialist patriarchy comes in contact with pre-existing regional patriarchies” (Mignolo, & Walsh, 2018).

Indian post-colonial feminist Tapenade¹ calls this method of the production of the third-world woman as singular monolithic subject, *Analytic Reductivism*, which according to her “is a directly political practice to reinforce the hegemonic euro-centric colonial discourse that exists specifically within a relation of power” (Talpande, 1986).

¹ A method that implies collection of large number of fragmented examples to add up to a universal fact.

I argue that the method that produces a singular monolithic gendered periphery woman also generates a residue or a surplus – Construction of a another somewhat homogenized subjectivity – a completely emancipated, free and empowered white gendered body who does not need to be saved. These imagined women pretty much exist in comparison with each other. Making the method counterproductive for both the gendered subject and the subjected.

The *raison d'être* behind this paper is not to mitigate White feminism and its genuine unprecedented struggle against patriarchy. But to highlight that when white feminists engage with women of colour, they categorically disconnect themselves from their own struggle. As the strength of the chain is measured from its weakest link, the aim of the paper is to propose a common ground for utopian feminist future which validates cultural, religious and racial differences, yet create a universal connection.

I situate myself in this paper as a gendered post-colonial academic in North-America. Negotiating my post-colonial gendered subjectivity against the colonial myth of a universally and somewhat homogenized empowered/ emancipated white woman. Without much of a historical precedent, in this paper, I position myself as an investigative subject instead of the investigated. Hence, this paper does not analyse the adversity of women of colour but aims to destabilize, contest and complicate the surplus myth surrounding the white gendered subjectivity, in order to challenge Western modern/imperial/colonial and hierarchical cultural constructs.

Intrigued by the 2016 US elections in which 44% white college graduate women voted for a candidate who, at the very least, had a questionable relationship with their gender,² I questioned that what if white women silenced themselves to support racism, disregarding sexism due to the internalization of hierarchy of gender-interests within politics?

Theoretical framework

I like to frame the voluntary or involuntary silencing of these gendered bodies theoretically, before I give three examples of silenced white gendered bodies to support my methodology. Using decolonial concepts, I reinterpret Spivak's thesis – “doubly effaced itinerary of gendered colonial subject” in her canonical essay: *Can the subaltern speak?* to construct my argument.

Firstly, Spivak defines the levels of class-hierarchy within colonial subjects. She places the subaltern class at the very end hence universalizing subaltern class into a destitute economic category. However, to conceptualize the silencing of gendered subaltern she uses three examples within colonial historiography as well as revisionist insurgent history:

1-The immolated *Ranis*, wives of Rajput maharaja's who died in wars and conflicts, and their unethical documentation within colonial historiography. She uses example of Edward Thompson's book *Suttee* (1928), she writes:

² The only rationale in this case happens to be that in conflict of interest between gender and race, historically, have women been aligning themselves with men due to the internalization of centuries of hierarchy within gender interests? However, this is a topic for another paper.

In his romanticized ideological production of victims, the identity of the burnt widows of the "Rajas" are almost as lost as the lower-class widows from Bengal where this ritual was most practiced (Spivak, 96).

2-The economically destitute Bengali immolated widows who remain nameless not only within colonial historiography but also revisionist history.

3- The complete absence of presence of representation around the suicide of a middle-class freedom fighter, a 17-year-old Bengali girl Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri's within revisionist Indian insurgent history.

I argue that Spivak's gendered subaltern has a nuanced existence and nuanced silencing, she can be a *Rani* (princess) and given certain circumstances turn into a subaltern or she can be a freedom fighter and be misrepresented or silenced within her own history. Extending the argument, we can argue that women are more susceptible to silencing in every economic category and/or at least the ethics of their representations are always questionable due to the universal patriarchal nature of the societies.

Spivak concludes "within an effaced itinerary of a colonial subject the figure of a woman is more deeply in shadow," If we extend this concept, we can conclude that due to the universally patriarchal nature of societies when certain conditions are created to silence subjectivities, women's itinerary would always be more effaced

Examples: Universal Culture of Gender Silencing

I briefly analyse three mainstream media examples to explore the universal culture of victim shaming or victim silencing around gendered sexual related crimes and how epistemic violence³ failed white women by completely silencing them in North-America (here specifically the US), especially when the opponent is white privileged male.

1. Brock Turner vs Emily Doe

Brock Turner and Emily Doe is a very high-profile gender-crime related case. Two men riding bicycles on campus about 1 a.m. saw Turner on top of an unconscious woman who had been stripped naked. The most disturbing aspect of this case was the letter Turner's father wrote to the judge. In the letter he calls the indictment of his son on a rape charge "steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action." (Fantz, 2016) This statement gives us a glimpse into a certain male mindset that considers rape a collateral damage for female freedom. A country where activism can get you up to 10 years in jail there was 6-month sentence for Brock Turner. In the newspaper Emily Doe was repeatedly referred to as the 'unconscious intoxicated woman,' 10 syllables, and nothing more, whereas almost all information about Brock Turner starts with "The Star Stanford swimmer," (Sprankles, 2016) the nature of the case by no means required a list of collegiate extracurriculars.

³ Institutionalized violence.

2. Judge Kavanaugh vs Christine Blasely Ford

The famous case of Professor Christine Blasely Ford's harassment accusation against Republican candidate Brett Kavanaugh. Right after her accusations were made public Dr. Ford became the target of vicious harassment, character assassination, and even death threats especially on social media. As a result of these kind of threats, her family was forced to relocate out of their home (Durkin, 2018).

3. Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes (Netflix, 2019)

Last but not the least the unethical documentation of 34 raped and murdered young women during the 70s. The Netflix documentary series (2019) – from Bundy's charismatic profile shots, to the absence of any investigative journalism towards victims' perspective, to the sentence of the judge – is an epitome of white male-hero worship and unethical representations that surround gendered crimes.

The examples above reflect the inclination of social/ media and institutional silencing of white women who under ordinary circumstances would be considered empowered. The paper argues that this the nuanced existence of subalternity locks Chishti's women in an empathetic embrace.

Free Hugs: Feminist Futures – Case Study

Chishti (b.1964) is a Pakistani born diasporic artist settled in New York since 2002. *Free-Hugs* (2002) (Figure 1) is a three-dimensional installation consisting of ten half life-size female fabric sculptures perched on austere wooden planks. These sculptures hold each other in what seems like an empathetic embrace.

I argue, through a visual and contextual analyses of Chishti's *Free hugs*, that this ephemeral installation, photographed at the shores of the Hudson River, is extremely multivalent and open to wide spectrum of interpretations. These soft, colourful and large-bodied rag dolls create a unified female experience of silenced pasts, yet new futures of shared grief, loss, and love.

Chishti uses textile residues and fabric discards to shape the bodies of her fabric sculptures, skillfully crafting the contours of her large rag-dolls made of colourful discarded fabrics with different colour of hair made from wool.

My work offers the link between the tradition of doll making (in the subcontinent) and the contemporary sculpture. To me sewing, mending, tying seems a process of hope and a satisfaction of the desire to repair the scars that time leaves behind (Chishti, 2002).

Firstly, her skillfully stitched figurative sculptures are made of fragile, ephemeral, delicate and light materials that are traditionally used by women within households. It challenges the historically used canonical sculptural methods and materials (hard, permanent, solid heavy, and hence masculine). Further her large female forms subvert the masculine romance of sensual female forms within Western as well as Eastern art history –The goddess and the temptress, recipient of the male gaze!



Chishti's women locked in a compassionate embrace do not allow a space for a male glaze, it creates an ephemeral female experience where the male gaze becomes redundant. Rather these women with their large colourful bodies claim their physical space in the world and demand to be seen not looked at.

To be more specific the earliest example of rag doll is dated: 1st CE-5th CE (Figure 3), made from linen stuffed with rags and papyrus, and was found Egypt, Oxyrhynchus. The presence of a small blue glass bead attached to the proper left side of the head even suggests a hair ornament.

I argue that Chishti's work creates a feminist language that is extremely peripheral, and regionally grounded in South Asian cultural heritage, yet transcends time and space, creating a new universal language in art that is regionally imbedded but creates a transnational feminist semiotic.



Figure 3: Retrieved from https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=400067&partId=1

Furthermore, in the light of a recent scholarly concept known as Capitalocene, which argues that Capitalism, and not humanity, is at root of our universal ecological crisis, the upcycling of old rags and textile discards to create her massive artwork, Christi's sculptures take on yet another universal meaning.

Opening up to symbolic and metaphoric referents, her interest in working in such materials raises the question of permanence as well as refer to transience of life, and points at the society's obsession with material consumption. Especially, keeping in mind that the catastrophic environmental hazards, climate change, floods, draughts, and other undeniable markers as the result of Anthropocene and Capitalocene, makes women threefold at the risk of being dislocated.⁴

Chishti creates this surreal contrast of an empathetic, sustainable feminist world in foreground of what seems like the reflection of a city skyline in the river waters, indicating to the modern manmade world. She states "*Today when world is at war, I look for my material, a bandage.... or dressing*" (Chishti, 2002).

⁴ UN figures indicate that 80% of people displaced by climate change are women, but the average representation of women in national and global climate negotiating bodies is below 30% (Halton, 2018).

Conclusion

Using decolonial methodology to reinterpret universality within Spivak's concept of "doubly effaced itinerary," of a gendered subaltern, this paper aspired to subvert the canonical white feminist methodology of racial hierarchy within feminism in favour of an alternative feminist alliance. By using three gendered crime cases in the US, and the absence of ethical representations of these gendered white bodies, the paper argued that Cishtis's artwork *free hugs* (2002) unifies women in a universal but nuanced experience of being silenced. Further, the paper proposed the creation a new form of alliance based not on racial gendered hierarchy but on equality, compassion, empathy, and respect.

In the words of one of the most influential 20th century white feminist, Adrienne Rich:

The connections between and among women are the most feared. The most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.

However, this paper argues that these feminist connections need to be revised and decolonized, in order to reimagine feminist futures that instead of authorizing patriarchal/racial imperialism and economic colonization, destabilize it. And in the words of Sobonfu Somé, one of the foremost voices in African spirituality, "Making the world a sustainable place is deeply connected to our ability to grieve together" (Somé, n.d). I conclude Christi's grieving women destabilizes the world that was created by men for men and makes us want to strive for new feminist futures: the creation of new sustainable inter-cultural feminist worlds.

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