

Book Review

Women of Color and Feminism By *Maythee Rojas*

Young Sun Kim
Yonsei University, Korea

Utilizing feminist insights and episodes from daily life, and especially feedback and interactions with students in the women's studies classroom, Maythee Rojas deals with diverse topics relating to women of color in her book, *Women of Color and Feminism* (2009). This book discusses such issues in cumulative historical representation, also in social mechanics, producing cultural outcomes for ethnic women. In constructing female identity, Rojas not only emphasizes the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, but also raises questions about the politics of representation, and how politics has been exercised in constituting specific images of women of color. She introduces diverse women's movement groups and their activities/strategies that continue to enable change in current gender-discriminated patriarchal structures.

Rojas asserts the need to discuss communality and differences crossing the boundaries between women of color and their own diverse, complex histories. Historically, feminists have endeavored to understand the world from a female perspective based on the belief that new insights are obtained through changes in perspective; placing value on women's stories and experiences by decentering the hierarchal structure/order of Center/Margin. The problems raised here are who have been over-represented in the category of women, and how have white women and their perspectives been the assumed subjects of feminist enquiry (ix). This prevalent and unquestioned phenomenon has alienated women of color and their urgent issues - e.g. violence, health, reproductive issues etc. - even within diverse movement groups. In addition, one of the important factors rendering women of color invisible is the issues of how the color of a women's skin sometimes have been construed as a matter of ethnicity

upon the making of categories (e.g. Peruvian, Vietnamese, Korean etc.).

One of the interesting aspects of this book is its problematization of the university's academic curriculum, especially pertaining to the content for women of color in college level courses. As a professor teaching university courses in women's studies, Rojas discovers an absence of attention to the lives and experiences of women of color and begins to struggle with the problem of how issues proper to women of color can gain visibility. According to her analysis, the same problems prevail in academia as also in educational institutions. However, the most important problem is that these issues are so marginalized that even the professors and researchers teaching these courses in academia often suffer marginalization. In fact, in the prologue of the book, she discusses the difficulties inherent in creating a single, one-semester course dealing with a wide spectrum of issues related to the topic of women of color, especially how to narrow down the issues to be covered in the course and know with whom she might need to talk to in order to flesh out those issues

Looking more closely into the structure of the book, in the first chapter, "Defining Identities", the author points out that whiteness ingrained and affixed normalcy (Rojas, 2009, p. 9-10) in our society. Regarding whiteness, which has been taken for granted, the author analyzed its construction and structure as well its representation and privilege by looking at diverse, black American women's historical experiences in the U.S. Especially, the importantly raised aspect by the author is how issues surrounding gender and sexuality have historically excluded and erased women's (questions) existence, focusing on the principle of inclusion and exclusion even within their own diverse, ethnic, national, and political communities. There have been lots of cases and testimonies that women, gays and lesbians were entirely marginalized in 1970s nationalist movement groups. She points out that "women of color carry the extra burden of being judged through the additional prisms of race and class" (Rojas, 2009, p. 35) and that there were diverse women's reaction for visualizing women's diverse identities and positions by constituting the verbal categories of women (e.g. from Chicano women to Chicana) (Rojas, 2009, p. 22).

In chapter two, "Embodied Representation", concerning the issues of representational politics, she argues that there are historical struggles by

African-American women, especially in the field of mass (visual) culture. Images of black women are negatively fixed and the assumptions underlining them work as an obstacle for them to gain social mobility in diverse, public sectors.

In chapter three, dealing with "Individual and Collective Social Struggles", Rojas historically traces back how, when, and why violence against women of color first began by looking at the relationship between male settlers and female slaves (Rojas, 2009, p. 53). She points out not only the effects of Orientalism, but also how gender discrimination has caused double barriers for Asian women. Also, the Confucianist-based cultures of specific Asian communities functioned as a barrier in exposing battered women's issues inside and outside their own community boundaries in regarding women as betrayers to their community grounded on the dichotomized value of good women versus bad women.

Chapter four deals with, on the one hand, how alternative images of women of color are created and how their counter-discourses and narratives are constituted by critically reviewing dominant images of women of color that circulate through mainstream and public media in the U.S. Also, she explores the roles and effects of feminist publishing companies upon the making of venues in which new images of women of color are visualized and circulated.

In the last chapter, "Loving Selves", the author very carefully looks into the issue of recovering damaged self-esteem (Rojas, 2009, p. 137) and discusses alternative values and attitudes we must have in order to understand others by reviewing diverse, feminist theories by philosophers. The most interesting notion cited by the author was Maria Lugones' "travel metaphor" based on mutual exchange as well as "cross-cultural and cross-racial loving" (Rojas, 2009, p. 142). According to Lugones' explanation, "women of color can adopt strategies of surviving their trips into these violent worlds by using 'playful' methods such as those that lack rules or competition and involve finding [in] ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight" (Rojas, 2009, p. 142).

Last but not least, I would like to close this book review by pointing out its virtues as well as its limitations. First, this book delivers clearly a message that the marginalized know their own worlds as well as the mainstream world. In order to newly understand the world, double-marginalized positions make us re-conceptualize who we are, and

open up new potential and imagination escaping white standards and privileges. Second, by exposing and addressing issues of how women of color are marginalized, even in the field of women's studies, knowledge production, and feminism, the book forces readers to look back at our current episteme.

Third, Rojas' introductory study includes a list of additional resources at the end of the book. In addition, she introduces an abundance of historical events throughout the book in the form of box articles. This is a big virtue to the book because the lay-out stimulates readers' interests and helps to extend their understanding about past trajectories and struggles of women's movement groups and activities. Lastly, as the author also points out, transnational feminisms are necessary, because "this world is connected (or tied) in culture and in sociopolitical experiences to many communities outside the United States" (Rojas, 2009, p. 149). In this respect, the question of how issues of women of color in the U.S. are able to meet transnational feminism should be extended and examined more deeply. In the era of globalization and international migration of women on a large scale, crossing-boundaries has emerged as an important issue. With such changes in our structure and epistemology of understanding difference, it seems really important to theorize and practice how to vitalize and respect different historical roots and cultural heritages in constructing women's solidarity around the globe. Because the issues surrounding women of color are no longer able to be captured or be solved within the unit of state boundary.

Biographical Note: **Young Sun Kim** is a HK Research Professor at the Institute of Korean Studies at Yonsei University. She graduated from SUNY Binghamton, majoring in Historical Sociology and Feminist Theory. Her research interests include comparative-historical (colonial) modernity in Asia, the transformation of the North Korean gender regime, and the historical trajectories and divergences of Korean women's movements.