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Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference

*Xvni X2Q ml 1l e*To raise the question of identity is to reopen again the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations. Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, non-I, other. In such a concept the other is almost unavoidably either opposed to the self or submitted to the self's dominance. It is always condemned to remain its shadow while attempting at being its equal. Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I, he and she; between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal identity; between us here and them over there. The further one moves from the core the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, the real Black, Indian or Asian, the real woman. The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized.

If identity refers to the whole pattern of sameness within a being, the style of a continuing me that permeated all the changes undergone, then difference remains within the

boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another. This means that at heart X must be X, Y must be Y, and X cannot be Y. Those running around yelling X is not X and X can be Y, usually land in a hospital, a rehabilitation center, a concentration camp, or a reservation. All deviations from the dominant stream of thought, that is to say, the belief in a permanent essence of woman and in an invariant but fragile identity whose loss is considered to be a specifically human danger, can easily fit into the categories of the mentally ill or the mentally underdeveloped.

It is probably difficult for a normal, probing mind to recognize that to seek is to lose, for seeking presupposes a separation between the seeker and the sought, the continuing me and the changes it undergoes. Can identity, indeed, be viewed other than as a by-product of a manhandling of life, one that, in fact, refers no more to a consistent pattern of sameness than to an inconsequential process of otherness. How am I to lose, maintain, or gain a female identity when it is impossible for me to take up a position outside this identity from which I presumably reach in and feel for it? Difference in such a context is that which undermines the very idea of identity, differing to infinity the layers of totality that forms I.

Hegemony works at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest details of our daily lives. Uncovering this leveling of differences is, therefore, resisting that very notion of difference which defined in the master's terms often resorts to the simplicity of essences. Divide and conquer has for centuries been his creed, his formula of success. But a different terrain of consciousness has been explored for some time now, a terrain in which clear cut divisions and dualistic oppositions such as science vs. subjectivity, masculine vs. feminine, may serve as departure points for analytical purpose but are no longer satisfactory if not entirely untenable to the critical mind.

I have often been asked about what some viewers call the lack of conflicts in my films. Psychological conflict is often equated with substance and depth. Conflicts in Western contexts often serve to define identities. My suggestion to the "lack" is: let difference replace conflict. Difference as understood in many feminist and non-Western contexts, difference as foreground in my film work is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness. Difference, in other words, does not necessarily give rise to separatism. There are differences as well as similarities within the concept of difference. One can further say that difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict. This is where confusion often arises and where the challenge can be issued. Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid type of difference.

Let me point to a few examples of practices of such a notion of difference. There are quite many, but I'll just select three and perhaps we can discuss those. First of all I would take

the example of the veil as reality and metaphor. If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So that when women decide to lift the veil one can say that they do so in defiance of their men's oppressive right to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put on the veil they once took off they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization.

Second, the use of silence. Within the context of women's speech silence has many faces. Like the veiling of women just mentioned, silence can only be subversive when it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories. On the one hand, we face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, as lack and blank in rejecting the importance of the act of enunciation. On the other hand, we understand the necessity to place women on the side of negativity and to work in undertones, for example, in our attempts at undermining patriarchal systems of values. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored.

Third, the question of subjectivity. The domain of subjectivity understood as sentimental, personal, and individual horizon as opposed to objective, universal, societal, limitless horizon is often attributed to both women, the other of man, and natives, the Other of the West. It is often assumed, for example, that women's enemy is the intellect, that their apprehension of life can only wind and unwind around a cooking pot, a baby's diaper, or matters of the heart. Similarly, for centuries and centuries we have been told that primitive mentality belongs to the order of the emotional and the affective, and that it is incapable of elaborating concepts. Primitive man feels and participates. He does not really think or reason. He has no knowledge, "no clear idea or even no idea at all of matter and soul," as Levi-Bruhl puts it. Today this persistent rationale has taken on multiple faces, and its residues still linger on, easily recognizable despite the refined rhetoric of those who perpetuate it.

Worth mentioning again here is the question of outsider and insider in ethnographic practices. An insider's view. The magic word that bears within itself a seal of approval. What can be more authentically other than an otherness by the other, herself? Yet, every piece of the cake given by the master comes with a double-edged blade. The Afrikaners are prompt in saying "you can take a Black man from the bush, but you can't take the bush from the Black man." The place of the native is always well-delimited. "Correct" cultural filmmaking, for example, usually implies that Africans show Africa, Asians Asia, and Euro-Americans, the world. Otherness has its laws and interdictions. Since you can't take the bush from the Black man, it is the bush that is consistently given back to him, and as things often turn out it is also this very bush that the Black man shall make his exclusive territory. And he may do so with the full awareness that barren land is hardly a gift. For in

the unfolding of power inequalities, changes frequently require that the rules be re-appropriated so that the master be beaten at his own game. The conceited giver likes to give with the understanding that he is in a position to take back whenever he feels like it and whenever the acceptor dares or happens to trespass on his preserves. The latter, however, sees no gift. Can you imagine such a thing as a gift that takes? So the latter only sees debts that, once given back, should remain his property –although land owning is a concept that has long been foreign to him and that he refused to assimilate.

Through audiences' responses and expectations of their works, non-white filmmakers are often informed and reminded of the territorial boundaries in which they are to remain. An insider can speak with authority about her own culture, and she's referred to as the source of authority in this matter—not as a filmmaker necessarily, but as an insider, merely. This automatic and arbitrary endowment of an insider with legitimized knowledge about her cultural heritage and environment only exerts its power when it's a question of validating power. It is a paradoxical twist of the colonial mind. What the outsider expects from the insider is, in fact, a projection of an all-knowing subject that this outsider usually attributes to himself and to his own kind. In this unacknowledged self/other relation, however, the other would always remain the shadow of the self. Hence not really, not quite all-knowing. That a white person makes a film on the Goba of the Zambezi, for example, or on the Tasaday of the Philippine rainforest, seems hardly surprising to anyone, but that a Third World member makes a film on other Third World peoples never fails to appear questionable to many. The question concerning the choice of subject matter immediately arises, sometimes out of curiosity, most often out of hostility. The marriage is not consumable for the pair is no longer outside/inside, that is to say, objective vs. subjective, but something between inside/inside—objective in what is already claimed as objective. So, no real conflict.

Interdependency cannot be reduced to a mere question of mutual enslavement. It also consists in creating a ground that belongs to no one, not even to the creator. Otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference when it is not given but recreated. Furthermore, where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color, by language, by geography, by nation, or by political affinity? What about those, for example, with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? And here it is worth noting, for example, a journalist's report in a recent *Xiq i* issue which is entitled, "The Crazy Game of Musical Chairs." In this brief report attention is drawn to the fact that people in South Africa who are classified by race and place into one of the nine racial categories that determine where they can live and work, can have their classification changed if they can prove they were put in a wrong group. Thus, in an announcement of racial reclassifications by the Home Affairs Ministers one learns that 9 whites became colored, 506 coloreds became white, 2 whites became Malay, 14 Malay became white, 40 coloreds became Black, 666 Blacks became colored, and the list goes on. However, says the minister, no Blacks apply to become whites. And no whites became Black.

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.

This is not to say that the historical I can be obscured and ignored and that differentiation cannot be made, but that I is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic and is always more or less in relation to a judging subject. Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities. They are also at work within the outsider herself or the insider, herself—a single entity. She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life.

The subjectivity at work in the context of this inappropriate other can hardly be submitted to the old subjectivity/objectivity paradigm. Acute political subject awareness cannot be reduced to a question of self-criticism toward self-improvement, nor of self-praise toward greater self-confidence. Such differentiation is useful, for a grasp of subjectivity as, let's say, the science of the subject or merely as related to the subject, makes the fear of self-absorption look absurd. Awareness of the limits in which one works need not lead to any form of indulgence in personal partiality, nor to the narrow conclusion that it is impossible to understand anything about other peoples since the difference is one of essence. By refusing to naturalize the I, subjectivity uncovers the myth of essential core, of spontaneity and depth as inner vision. Subjectivity, therefore, does not merely consist of talking about oneself, be this talking indulgent or critical. In short, what is at stake is a practice of subjectivity that is still unaware of its own constituted nature, hence, the difficulty to exceed the simplistic pair of subjectivity and objectivity; a practice of subjectivity that is unaware of its continuous role in the production of meaning, as if things can make sense by themselves, so that the interpreter's function consists of only choosing among the many existing readings; unaware of representation as representation, that is to say, the cultural, sexual, political inter-reality of the filmmaker as subject, the reality of the subject film and the reality of the cinematic apparatus. And finally unaware of the inappropriate other within every I.

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