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Sisterhood and “Doing Good”: Asymmetries of Western Feminist Location, Access, and Orbits of Concern

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Sisterhood and “Doing Good”: Asymmetries of Western Feminist Location, Access, and Orbits of Concern

Uma Narayan

Abstract

There are a variety of discourses and practices that position Western feminists (and Western political subjects more generally) as people who have a moral and political obligation to concern themselves with the welfare, suffering, or empowerment of non-Western subjects, often women, and intervene to “do good” on their behalf. Conversely, there are virtually no discourses and practices that assign moral and political obligations to non-Western feminists (or non-Western political subjects more generally) to intervene in matters involving the welfare or suffering of Western subjects, including women. A central goal of my paper is to make this asymmetry explicit and distinguish it from charges such as “essentialism” more commonly made against Western feminist representations of their Others. I explore the consequences of discourses and practices that construct Western subjects as entitled to and obligated to concern themselves with the world entire, while not extending this global scope of concern to non-Western subjects. I critically examine, among other things, the roles assigned Western-funded NGOs in enabling Western subjects to engage in practices of “doing good” and I explore alternative possibilities that are more explicitly “political.” Along the way, I examine certain blind spots in Western political theory that appear connected to the picture of Western subjects as obligated to “do good” in distant places. My analysis engages substantially with Alison Jaggar’s essay, “Saving Amina,” drawing attention to matters of agreement and possible disagreement.

Keywords: adaptive preferences, capillary power, democracy, criteria for development aid, dictators, doing good, gender essentialism, human rights, imperialism, liberalism, Alison Jaggar, neoliberalism, NGOs, non-Western feminists, non-Western women, patriarchy, resource privilege, Saving Amina, Western feminism, Western women

Introduction

This essay addresses some problems that beset Western and Western feminist engagement with issues affecting women and the “global poor” in non-Western contexts. My analysis engages throughout with Alison Jaggar’s (2005a)

thought-provoking article, “Saving Amina.” I strongly agree with Jaggar’s critique of Western feminist tendencies toward “culture blaming” and with her insistence that Western feminists should focus on the ways in which Western countries and subjects *themselves contribute* to the problems faced by non-Western women (2005a, 75). I want to extend and complicate Jaggar’s critique by focusing on certain interesting asymmetries of power pertaining to location, access, and orbits of concern between Western and non-Western subjects, including feminists. These asymmetries help to construct Western subjects as having *one-sided obligations* to concern themselves, morally and politically, with issues in non-Western contexts while effacing the existence, nature, and consequences of this one-sidedness. These obligations are one-sided because non-Western subjects are not constructed as having parallel obligations to make moral and political interventions on similar issues located in the West, rendering the scope of their concerns far narrower than those of Western subjects. This one-sidedness transforms what appear to be obligations into a form of Western privilege whose theoretical and practical consequences I want to explore.

I begin by sketching a dominant Western Political Imaginary at work in the Amina case which helps me point toward some of these asymmetries. I make these asymmetries more explicit as I go on, offering a picture of how they structure the framing of Western and Western feminist philosophical discourses pertaining to non-Western Others. I illustrate how these asymmetries go beyond theoretical discourse, showing how they are replicated by real-world practices that enable Westerners to travel to non-Western contexts to express such one-sided concern in multiple corners of the non-Western world. I end with an exploration of how these asymmetries play out in shaping concepts and solutions prevalent both in Western feminist discourses and in Western philosophical discourses on global justice. Along the way I offer an account of what I think is required of Westerners rising to Jaggar’s call to focus on how they themselves contribute to problems faced by non-Western subjects. I will explain my reasons for pessimism both about the ways in which they might interpret this call and about their willingness to do what is required.

The Western Political Imaginary and the Case of Amina

Jaggar’s “Saving Amina” begins with a discussion of Western engagement with the case of Amina Lawal, a divorced Nigerian woman initially convicted of adultery under Sharia law for having a child outside marriage. In early 2003, an electronic petition asked recipients to sign an appeal against the sentence of stoning to death that it depicted as imminent, collecting over five million signatures.¹ A few

¹ The five million figure is from Libby Brooks’s article, “Saving Amina” (*Guardian*, May 7, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/08/gender.uk>).

months later, another email signed by Ayesha Imam and Sindi Medar-Gould, representatives of Nigerian organizations engaged in Lawal’s legal defense, asked people to stop the protest-letter campaign. Jaggar (2005a, 55) notes that this second email asserted that the Save Amina petition “endangered Lawal and made the task of her Nigerian supporters more difficult, in part because the petition contained a number of factual errors, including a false assertion that execution of the sentence was imminent.”

Jaggar (2005a, 73) notes that the counter-appeal expressed concern about protest letters that stereotyped Islam as incompatible with human rights, perpetuating racism, inflaming local sentiments, strengthening the hand of local right-wing extremists, and putting victims of human rights abuses and their supporters at risk. I want to add that Westerners often remain unaware of the very *possibility* that their expressions of solidarity may pose dangers to the women they wish to help. I think there is a dominant Western Political Imaginary that helps to insulate Western subjects from understanding that their expressions of concern might do harm, an Imaginary that goes back to colonial times.

Westerners often see their actions of protest and solidarity as an expression of individual concern, overlooking their identities as citizens of Western nations that have long had, and continue to have, adverse economic and political impacts on distant countries. In earlier work, I described the ways in which the colonial encounter, part of the history of most non-Western countries, resulted in ideological battles between colonial powers and nationalist male elites over understandings of “native culture” and its values. Justifications for colonization relied on depictions of native culture as barbaric and backward, and practices pertaining to women (such as sati or veiling) were centrally deployed in support of these depictions. Anticolonial nationalist discourses constructed by male elites responded by depicting these very practices as constitutive of their culture’s special respect for women.

Both colonialist and nationalist discourses tended to misrepresent the nature, meanings, and consequences of these practices, making the women of the colonies mere placeholders in their political contestations. Non-Western women were constructed as subjects who were constantly being “spoken for” by either Westerners who desired to rescue them from the cruelties of native patriarchy or by local male elites who wished to rescue them from the evils of “Westernization.” Neither recognized these women’s capacities to articulate their own interests. Feminists in former colonies continue to struggle with these legacies as they attempt to redefine and contest local practices in feminist terms (Narayan 1997). And, Western feminists continue to struggle with this Western legacy of speaking for non-Western women.

Some concerns that Imam expresses about the Save Amina petition illustrate how these legacies play out in the Nigerian context. Imam worries about how

Western signature campaigns can incite “vigilante and political overreaction to international attempts at pressure” and cites the case of an unmarried teenager convicted of extramarital sex whose flogging sentence was illegally brought forward by a state governor who boasted of his resistance to “letters from infidels.”² Westerners are often woefully ignorant about the complex legal systems of contemporary non-Western nation-states. Many signatories of the Save Amina petition would likely be surprised to learn that

a similar case last year involving a woman named Safiya Hussein . . . had also been overturned upon appeal. Even if Ms. Lawal’s sentence had been upheld by the upper Shariah court in Katsina State . . . , she would still have had two chances to appeal, both times to secular courts: first to the Federal Court of Appeal, and then to the Supreme Court. Both courts would have acquitted her because in Nigeria, federal law, which doesn’t punish adultery, is superior to any regional law, religious or otherwise. And the president Olusegun Obasanjo opposes capital punishment; no executions have been carried out since he took office in 1999.³

Many Westerners might be even more surprised to learn that Nigerian groups had successfully used *Islamic law itself* to appeal such cases before a higher court—they had a record of successfully appealing seven or eight cases that raised issues similar to Amina’s in the prior three years. Many Western subjects tend to imagine non-Western patriarchy and religious fundamentalism as entirely *sui generis*, a view historically connected to colonialist pictures of non-Western cultures.⁴ They thereby efface the ways in which Western policies contribute to these phenomena. Jaggar provides numerous examples that sharply challenge this colonial picture. She calls attention to the poverty, dislocations, upheavals, and violence created in these countries as a result of neoliberal economic policies imposed by Western-dominated international institutions (Jaggar 2005a, 62–65). Imam too describes how structural adjustment policies imposed on the African continent by the IMF and World Bank have slashed spending on health and

² Ibid.

³ The passage is from Helon Habila’s article “Justice, Nigeria’s Way” (*New York Times*, October 4, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/04/opinion/justice-nigeria-s-way.html>).

⁴ For a good example, see Sinha (2006). Sinha’s book focuses its analysis on American journalist Katherine Mayo’s 1927 book *Mother India*, which depicted a variety of social ills affecting Indian women as results of an irredeemable Hindu culture that rendered India unfit for self-government.

education and switched agriculture from subsistence farming to cash-cropping in ways that have increased hunger and sickness—upheavals that have strengthened the appeal of religious fundamentalism.⁵

Large-scale global policies which demonstrate Western culpability for harms in distant places are seldom the subject matter of protest petitions eliciting the concerned clicks of Western subjects—an asymmetry I find interesting. I am not suggesting that such electronic petitions would cause significant change to those policies, but I do think they would have the minimal virtue of educating Westerners about the ways in which the international economic and political policies of their nation-states adversely affect the lives of millions elsewhere. Such information might help them learn that their status as Western citizens is likely to have harmful effects on how their expressions of concern are heard and interpreted abroad—when, for instance, they are perceived as acting in tandem with their nation-states, their aid-agencies, and their corporations as one more form of Western intrusion into contexts not their own. Even in cases where the sincerity of Westerners’ concern, their liberty to critique, and the sagacity of their criticisms are unimpeachable, Westerners cannot undo the reality that their voices speak and are heard in a world where Western subjects have plenty of say that is *entirely one-sided and nonreciprocal* in non-Western contexts.

Asymmetries of Concern: Western Theorizing and Non-Western Subjects

I would like to turn to thinking about the fact that non-Western subjects are seldom invited to express moral or political concern about the patriarchal problems suffered by Western women. Why have people not come across innumerable petitions specifically soliciting non-Western individuals, including feminists, to express outrage about or support for a Western woman facing some horrible patriarchal problem? Why is it that such solicitations are even difficult to imagine? There is no dearth of Western women who suffer greatly from patriarchy. And, while proportionately fewer non-Westerners may have access to computers, a considerable number do in fact have access. Even outside the electronic domain, non-Western citizens and feminists are seldom, if ever, recruited to show support for women confronting patriarchal problems in Western contexts or asked to think about their obligations to address injustice in Western contexts. The taken-for-granted ubiquity of this phenomenon makes it easy not to notice. Permit me to belabor this point by “putting in reverse” the questions at the end of the opening paragraph of Alison Jaggar’s essay, “Global Responsibility and Western Feminism,” switching the subject-positions of Western and non-Western subjects. I want my

⁵ See Michele Landsberg’s “Muslim Feminist Focuses on Roots of Extremism” (*Toronto Star*, Dec. 15, 2002).

readers to register the strangeness of this reversal. That text (Jaggar 2005b, 185) would then read as follows:

It is indisputable that, in a variety of mundane ways, women in the global North are worse off than are otherwise comparably situated men. How should feminist philosophers in the global South respond? Are we entitled or even obligated to criticize customs and traditions in the global North that we regard as oppressive to women? Should we support practical interventions destined to improve Northern women's situations?

Why are these questions never asked? It is true, after all, that, in a variety of mundane ways, women in the global North *are* worse off than are otherwise comparably situated men. And there surely are feminists and feminist philosophers and academics in a variety of disciplines in the global South capable of exercising their intellectual and political faculties on such matters. So, why is the arrow of concern for one's Others so ubiquitous in one direction and peculiarly impossible in the other? What does this asymmetry say about dominant notions of *feminist* solidarity and *global* responsibility? And, how does this asymmetry fit in with the universalism of human rights discourse, which asserts that all of us are obliged to care about the human rights of all our fellow humans, a discourse often deployed to support Westerners' obligations to condemn harmful patriarchal practices in non-Western contexts? I want to make this interesting asymmetry visible as one which routinely and tacitly signifies that Westerners have an obligation to be attentive to the problems of non-Western Others but that these Others are not expected to reciprocate this concern.

I have an amused suspicion that in the Political Imaginary that underwrites this asymmetry, non-Western subjects are thought of as too exhausted to concern themselves with Western problems—they are imagined to be subjects drowning in the quagmire of their local poverty and patriarchal oppression, or they are subjects politically exhausted by fighting all those issues on their own turf. Non-Western feminists' "orbit of concern" is thus confined to patriarchal practices in their *own* contexts and perhaps to occasional countering of Western feminist misconceptions about non-Western contexts—a pattern evident in a great deal of feminist discourse and exemplified in the case of Amina. Various forms of oppression in Western contexts are not conceptualized as topics for non-Western moral concern, let alone political intervention.

If I were a Western feminist (and in some ways I am) inclined to intervene on issues in non-Western contexts, such asymmetries of power would worry me. I would feel uneasy about the ways in which this asymmetry seems analogous to the one-sided way in which middle-class Victorian women thought they had political

obligations to their more “downtrodden” sisters in the colonies (Burton 1994). I would try to take account of the fact that not all non-Western subjects, including feminists, are more downtrodden and oppressed than all Western women. I would attend to the fact that their *countries* are unequal players in the global economy and in global geopolitics does not entail that there aren’t plenty of highly educated, affluent, or middle-class non-Western individuals and feminists whose lives are more comfortable than that of many poor and working-class women in the West. I would suspect that non-Western subjects were being effaced in yet another instance of Chandra Mohanty’s (1991, 56) oft-cited point that Western women are portrayed as educated and modern and free to make their own decisions while the “typical Third World woman” is seen as poor, uneducated, victimized, and so on. I would try to rescue my fellow Western subjects from being oblivious to these asymmetries.

The asymmetries of concern and location that I draw attention to here are different from postcolonial feminist critiques that charge Western feminist depictions of non-Western cultural practices with being forms of “feminist Orientalism” that exoticize and sensationalize them. These asymmetries pertain to the *location* and *orbits of concern* of Western and Western feminist subjects, not to the *content or manner of depiction* of Culturally Other practices. Even when the content of Western feminist understandings is unproblematic, these asymmetries are worrisome in that they posit certain (Western) subjects as entitled or obligated to concern themselves with matters *elsewhere and everywhere*, while other (non-Western) subjects seem tacitly confined to their own national and cultural corners. My point about these asymmetries also differs from charges of “feminist essentialism”—critiques that also pertain to the biases and overgeneralizations present in the *content* of Western feminist depictions of non-Western women.⁶ However, these asymmetries of location and concern might well undergird proclivities to Orientalism and essentialism, and something of the sort of essentialism Mohanty points to likely plays a role in the perpetuation of these asymmetries.

Asymmetries of Concern in Real-World Practices

The asymmetries I have described above do not manifest only in philosophical discourses or theoretical domains. They are deeply connected to a variety of “asymmetries in global practices” that enable large numbers of Western subjects to wander around the world making issues in non-Western contexts taken-for-granted matters of their “concern” and “doing good,” while non-Western

⁶ I draw on Jaggar’s discussion of feminist Orientalism and essentialism in “Saving Amina” (2005a, 56–58).

subjects are not enabled to travel in reverse, making Western issues sites for their moral or political engagement. That these sites of Western engagement encompass matters variously characterized as humanitarian issues, development issues, feminist issues, human rights issues, global justice issues, and so forth only make this asymmetry more pressing to think about.⁷

The Western *agents* of such engagement run the gamut from students and academic researchers in a wide variety of disciplines, to members of churches and secular institutions of charity, to people involved in various nodes in the web of “development organizations.” For brevity’s sake I will confine myself to saying a little about two ubiquitous “types.” Non-Western countries, especially the smaller and poorer ones, are full of Western subjects working for aid agencies, agencies that range from the official aid agencies of Western states (such as USAID) to a huge variety of private NGOs that receive Western (private and state) funding. Recipients of Western aid are often required (explicitly or tacitly) to hire “higher-level staff” for aid projects from the donor country. This remains the case even if suitable (and cheaper) personnel are available in the recipient country or in a different less-affluent country. ActionAid estimates that such “Technical Assistance” accounts for one quarter of all global aid expenditures (Greenhill 2005). Most of this money funds expensive Western consultants,⁸ and training and research carried out under their direction in non-Western contexts that is connected to research projects in the West. Many of them constitute the well-paid staff of the “development aid industry,” who get to live in poor countries and think of themselves as “doing good” while being paid lucrative Western salaries. Thomas Dichter has many eye-opening descriptions of exactly how lucrative some of these “development aid” jobs are.⁹

⁷ There are numerous Western subjects present in non-Western contexts other than those I focus on in this essay. They include the many Westerners who are present as part of Western military or security forces and those who are there as representatives of Western commercial interests.

⁸ See John-Paul Ford Rojas and Rowena Mason’s “Probe Over Millions Spent on Foreign Aid Consultants” (*Telegraph*, September 17, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9547162/Probe-over-millions-spent-on-foreign-aid-consultants.html>). The article mentions concerns about a group of “poverty barons” paying themselves up to 2 million British pounds a year for their work helping the disadvantaged.

⁹ Dichter (2003, 84–86) mentions a long list of “freebie” allowances that many development aid employees receive. The most interesting include a “hardship differential” that is often 25 percent of base salary and attached to all jobs in the Third World, a “hazardous duty differential” given when the country one is posted to is deemed “dangerous,” and a “Sunday differential” for those posted to Middle

The second sort of Western subject who gets to Go Abroad to Do Good is well-represented in the context where I teach. Several of my students report experiences ranging from pre-college “gap years” to summer internships to voluntourism stints to Junior Year Abroad segments, all of which take them to urban slums or rural villages in poor countries to engage in projects variously characterized as humanitarian efforts, human rights work, or feminist work helping to empower poor non-Western women. These individuals are taught to see themselves as capable subjects who can act to assist non-Western Others—without asking questions like what an American teenager who has never done her own laundry can do for poor villagers in Mali. In a heady mix, these experiences are marketed to Western subjects as opportunities to do good in exotic locations, as educational opportunities to learn about oneself and one’s Others, and as credentialization for a variety of employment opportunities later in their lives. For both types of Western subjects, moral efforts allegedly on behalf of less-fortunate Others become *crucial sites for self-advancement*.

The existence of both sorts of subjects appears to have made schlepping Concerned Westerners around to meet with their Oppressed Others a major NGO function in many non-Western countries. Under the guise of their being helped, subaltern lives, experiences, and speech have become valuable commodities for Western consumption, enriching the life-experiences, moral credentials, and career goals of Westerners. The global poor have become crucial raw materials in the Western marketplace of ideas and in the marketplace of funding opportunities for projects that purport to making the marginalized central. Their marginalization is paradoxically increasingly entangled with habituation to the concerned presence of Western Others, and to various practices of interrogation, commiseration, participation, and “empowerment,” which involve forms of intrusion nonsubalterns would never accept for themselves.¹⁰ (Neither here nor elsewhere do I wish to eclipse the roles that elites in non-Western contexts play in these processes. I cannot do justice to that topic in this paper.)

Most importantly, I would argue that both sorts of subjects embody forms of “capillary power” that extends the reach of the West beyond its more “arterial” connections to non-Western States and elites, all the way down to non-Western subjects who are poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised. Capillaries are connected to arteries, but these connections are often eclipsed in constructions of the “caring Western heart.” Metaphor aside, I am making a structural point about the many

Eastern countries where Friday is the holy day. Dichter mentions friends who complain of occasional postings “back home” where they had to pay their own mortgages, utilities, and costs of schooling their children.

¹⁰ For interesting examples, see the essays in Cooke and Kothari (2001).

connections—of funding, of research and information-sharing, of building circuits of influence, and of actual access to non-Western contexts—that exist between Western institutions that see themselves as “doing good” and those that are engaged in maintaining Western military and political power, access to markets, and so forth. Westerners engaged in “doing good” projects are often ignorant, sometimes willfully, about such structural connections and dearly wish to see themselves as “countering” rather than as complicit with harmful Western institutions. I encourage Western subjects to consider the fact that the “capillary power” of Doing Good projects is still power, and one-sided power at that, and to figure out its many connections to arterial types of Western power.

Both sorts of subjects I have discussed earlier do not have non-Western counterparts. Western countries are not dotted with non-Western do-gooders engaged in various forms of humanitarian, human-rights, development, or “women’s empowerment” work. Neither have I come across hordes of non-Western youth visiting the West primarily motivated by the prospect of Doing Good, although there are certainly many non-Western subjects getting an education here. So, in both theoretical-philosophical domains and in real-world practices, the “arrow of concern” remains heavily skewed in favor of Western subjects alone taking an interest in the welfare of their Others and having a variety of forms of institutionally mediated “capillary” access to their Others.

This brings me to an important issue on which Jaggar and I may have significant differences—the vexed issue of non-Western NGO’s and their Western funding. Jaggar is clearly aware of many of the current critiques of NGO’s—she mentions the problems of Western money coming with strings attached, civil society organizations’ dependence on nonelected overseas funders, priorities determined abroad, and nonaccountability to the local people. Nevertheless, she then concludes

In an integrated global economy, however, nonintervention is no longer an option; our inevitable interventions are only more or less overt and more or less morally informed. Although the foreign funding of women’s NGO’s has dangers, it is not necessarily imperialistic. (Jaggar 2005, 72–73)

It is clear Jaggar and I are both familiar with many of the same critiques of NGOs. It is also clear to me that I find myself balking at the two sentences I have quoted above. I will suggest what our differences on this topic might be by focusing on what I find myself resisting in these sentences while acknowledging uncertainty as to how deep a divergence there is between us. My own sense is that the global economy has been “integrated” from colonial times onward and that “inevitable (Western) interventions” which were more overt in the colonial period have changed to more covert forms. Thus, I am unsure as to what Jaggar means when she

says that nonintervention is “no longer” an option. I find myself uneasy with Jaggar’s sense that Western interventions into non-Western contexts are “inevitable” and that the only issue therefore is whether or not they are “overt” and “morally informed.” Given my interest in the asymmetries of location and concern between Western and non-Western subjects that are the central topic of my essay, I may well have a greater stake in asking Western subjects to be less sanguine and more worried about the fact that their “interventions” in non-Western contexts are “inevitable” while similar non-Western interventions into Western contexts are not. I worry too about exactly how the “overtness” and “moral informedness” of Western interventions are to be evaluated and by whom. In any case, the moral sagacity of Westerners strikes me as insufficient to undo the politically problematic existence of this asymmetry in the powers to intervene.

My restiveness about the “inevitability” of ongoing contemporary Western intervention into non-Western contexts may also be connected to the fact that I see this as symptomatic of the ways in which Westerners have continued to have “colonialist” positionings and powers with respect to many non-Western contexts. Different non-Western groups fought anticolonial struggles to have “a country of their own” that would enable them to become “citizens” of a state rather than remain “subjects” of a colonial power. They were struggles to eradicate Western control over non-Western territories in matters economic and political. However, very few of those postcolonial states have managed to retain much of their hoped-for autonomy, and one central effect of many current neoliberal policies has been to weaken those states further, transferring many of their “development” and “human rights” functions to NGOs. One does not have to be a fan of states to worry about the purposes behind this weakening or about the ongoing transformation of their “citizens” into “clients” of foreign-funded NGO’s. One might also worry about the overarching place of NGO’s in the global order—a place that Arundhati Roy describes as forming a buffer between empire and its subjects, constituting themselves as arbitrators, interpreters, and facilitators.¹¹ These are some of the reasons why I find myself unwilling to endorse Jaggar’s sense that foreign-funded NGOs are not “necessarily imperialistic.”

Keeping with the theme of this essay, let me point to yet another asymmetry using a thought experiment. Imagine Western citizens waking up to find non-Western funders, donors, and citizens in charge of a large chunk of their human rights, development, and welfare programs, and of the empowerment of their women. I feel pretty sure that they would not be concerned merely with whether these forces were overt or morally informed. They would worry about the

¹¹ See Arundhati Roy’s “Help that Hinders” (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, Nov. 16, 2004, <https://mondediplo.com/2004/11/16roy>).

undermining of the state capabilities of their own country, about the replacement of state functions by foreign private institutions accountable only to their donors, and about the antidemocratic implications of the conversion of their “citizens” into “clients” of foreign-funded organizations. They would worry about the agendas possibly being served by foreign funding *even in the absence of a long colonial history that would make them “imperialistic.”* And these worries might well generate some adverse responses—xenophobia among them. Since this is a thought experiment, I would like my readers to actively imagine what Western responses to NGOs might be in such a reversed situation.

While I am unsure how exactly to interpret the term “necessarily” in Jaggar’s contention that NGOs are not “necessarily imperialistic,” I can attempt to clarify one sense in which I do think they are. I cannot see how my antipathy for neoliberalism can ignore the *structural place* of NGOs in this schema. NGOs are part and parcel of the “privatization” policies and associated slashing of government expenditures endorsed by neoliberalism for poor non-Western states, whose public-sector State enterprises are being sold to private Western corporations and whose public welfare functions are shifted to private NGOs. Such “privatization” is mainly justified in terms of these countries needing to use their state funds to pay down their national debt. My *structural* point suggests that NGOs *are* in one important sense “necessarily imperialistic” to the same degree that neoliberalism is. Jaggar notes the refusal of the wealthiest countries to conform to their own neoliberal principles (2005a, 63), an asymmetry which only underscores, I think, the imperialistic structures in which NGOs are embedded.

I would like to draw attention to how such “structural” critiques of NGO’s can interact at cross-purposes with what appear to be more “empirical” arguments. When I discuss the issue of NGOs with students or friends, I am struck by the desire of my interlocutors to focus on a specific NGO they are familiar with and to insist on the specific good things the NGO has achieved in a particular context. Perhaps Jaggar’s sense that some particular NGOs are in fact doing some good might be at the root of her being less harsh in her assessment. However, I would like to point out that the possibility that some Western-funded NGO’s are doing some real “good” in non-Western contexts does not address the worries expressed by the structural critiques. I argue that a structural critique which asserts that Western-funded NGOs are the sugar coating on the bitter pill of global neoliberalism is not substantially undermined by assertions that sugar coatings do sometimes mask the bitterness of the pill!¹²

¹² Jaggar might also be responding to the fact that some Western-funded advocacy NGOs (such as Oxfam) have supported positions contrary to neoliberalism—such as increased public spending or preservation of state-funded public welfare programs. I

I am afraid that many Western subjects, including feminist and progressive subjects, are neither deeply familiar with the various critique of NGOs nor fully engaged by their import. This failing is partly the result of the Doing Good paradigm that keeps Westerners focused on questions of aid and how to “do aid better.” Surrounded by a cacophony of moral injunctions to help distant Others using Western aid, Western subjects seldom understand how such aid functions as an ideological smoke screen that allows problematic Western economic and geopolitical agendas to continue, without notice from Western citizens. How many Western subjects, I wonder, have come across, let alone fully digested, the fact that in 2012, developing countries received *a total of \$1.3 trillion including all aid, investments, and income from abroad while \$3.3 trillion flowed out of them to the developed world?* How many know that possibly the largest chunk of this is due to “trade misinvoicing” whereby both foreign and domestic corporations spirit money out to Western tax havens in places ranging from Belgium and Luxembourg to Delaware and Manhattan? How may would know that customs regulations that worked to make such “misinvoicing” nearly impossible until 1994 were altered to require customs to accept invoices at face value (except under very suspicious conditions) because the WTO deemed that the former rules made trade “inefficient?”¹³

am willing to count such aspects of their work as consistent with trying to get Western Feet off non-Western Necks. I am grateful to the editors for drawing my attention to this point. However, I remain unconvinced that Oxfam, for instance, is unproblematic as an institution. The following three articles capture aspects of my concern. Ian Brown discusses the increasing connections between “big charities,” including Oxfam and transnational corporations, in “The Company They Keep” (*New Internationalist*, December 1, 2014, <https://newint.org/features/2014/12/01/charities-and-transnationals>). Sexual exploitation by aid-workers has become a big issue of late, and one instance of it is outlined in Damien Gayle’s “Timeline: Oxfam Sexual Exploitation Scandal in Haiti” (*Guardian*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/timeline-oxfam-sexual-exploitation-scandal-in-haiti>). Finally, for a critique of Oxfam’s attempt to change its representations of Africa, see Tolu Ogunlesi’s “Oxfam’s New Africa Campaign Reveals a Misguided Messiah Complex” (*Guardian Africa Network*, Jan. 7, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/07/oxfam-campaign-africa-aid>).¹³ See Jason Hickel’s “Aid in Reverse: How Poor Countries Develop Rich Countries” (*Guardian*, Jan. 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jan/14/aid-in-reverse-how-poor-countries-develop-rich-countries>).

While Jaggar appears less critical of NGOs than I am, she does strongly endorse the obligations of Western subjects to call Western nation-states to account for the various harmful militaristic, anti-immigrant, and neoliberal economic policies they support nationally and internationally. She argues that the Western focus on non-Western cultural practices engages “in a form of culture blaming that depoliticizes social problems and diverts attention from structural violence against poor populations” (2005a, 74). Jaggar ends the article by saying, “Rather than simply blaming Amina Lawal’s culture, we should begin by taking our own feet off her neck” (75). While I agree with these positions, I would like to complicate them with some thoughts about what Jaggar’s call might entail and about powerful obstacles in its way.

Continuing Asymmetries in Western Theories of Global Justice

Agreeing with Jaggar, I argued earlier that the dominant Political Imaginary in Western contexts imagines Amina’s Neck as endangered purely by the local patriarchy that has her by the throat and which effaces the copresent danger she faces from Western Feet. This focus on local patriarchs is ubiquitous in a number of popular discourses about the problems of non-Western women—a good example is the book *Half the Sky*, where Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2010, xx) manage to position even Goldman Sachs, the World Bank, and the Pentagon as allies in rescuing non-Western women from local patriarchy.¹⁴ The Strangling Hands of local patriarchs remain far easier for Westerners to conceptualize than structural violence involving the complicities of Western Feet. If I may amuse myself by shifting metaphors to yet another body part and to the Bible, this situation perhaps explains why many Western feminists want to focus on the mote in their non-Western patriarchal brother’s eye and not on the beam of Western privilege in their own. (Neither here nor elsewhere do I wish to minimize the harms caused by local patriarchy.)

Where one’s privileges are direct causal consequences of the very institutions that create the “underprivileged,” as the concept of structural violence suggests, working towards changing the location of one’s Feet, strikes me, as it does Jaggar, as the place to start. But I am pessimistic about the alacrity and sagacity with which Westerners will rise to this task and worried that they will interpret this injunction in ways that keep them focused on “doing good” rather than on “ending harms.” Many Western subjects engaged in the NGO-mediated activities I criticized earlier appear to see their activities as countering the weight of Western Feet. I would like Western subjects to interpret Jaggar’s call differently, and not as an invitation to credentializing forms of “doing good.” On my preferred interpretation, Jaggar’s call would entail Westerners’ trying to start and sustain large-scale political

¹⁴ For a critical review of the book, see Narayan (2010).

movements in the West that challenge the foreign policies of powerful Western nation-states and international institutions, educating Western citizens about these policies, and making connections between issues at home and issues abroad. (It appears that many Western citizens need to learn a great deal about the weight of Western Feet on Western Necks in addition to their weight on non-Western Necks.¹⁵) It would entail trying to critically understand both the domestic and foreign conduct and policies of Western corporations. It would entail difficult political struggle and possible repercussions at the hands of state power that are not conducive to resume-building or funding opportunities. And, alas, my interpretation of Jaggar’s call requires Western subjects to stay and work politically on *home ground*, depriving them of travel opportunities and meaningful encounters with faraway “subaltern voices.”¹⁶ The option of fighting structural violence as it originates in their own institutions, and fighting it primarily on home ground, strikes me as the best option Western subjects have. However, I doubt the possibility of a significant shift in this direction soon, given the powerful discourses and institutions that leave many Westerners enthused about and rewarded for Doing Good in distant places.

It seems likely that I have some differences with Jaggar regarding the best ways in which Westerners should proceed in trying to remove their Feet. My own sense is that they should focus on “arterial domains,” on challenging and changing the Heads that currently determine the position of Western Feet and not in NGO-

¹⁵ A political movement that made connections between the growing inequalities of wealth and income in many Western countries and the poverty of the non-Western poor is an example of what I have in mind. Data suggests that income and wealth inequalities in the US are huge. According to recent reports, the wealthiest 1 percent of American households own 40 percent of the country’s wealth and the top 1 percent of households own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. (See Christopher Ingraham’s “The Richest 1 Percent Now Owns More of the Country’s Wealth Than at Any Time in the Past 50 Years” [*Washington Post*, December 6, 2017]). Most citizens do not appear to have an accurate understanding of either the size or the implications of these inequalities. For more on this, see “It’s the Inequality, Stupid” by Dave Gilson and Carolyn Perot (*Mother Jones*, March/April 2011, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-in-america-chart-graph/>).

¹⁶ For a position that long predates current debates on NGOs and Doing Good Abroad, but has some interesting affinities with my critique and what I would prefer Westerners to do instead, see Illich (2010). While Illich’s address was never published, it can be found in entirety in several places, including http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm.

mediated “capillary” areas close to non-Western Necks, where they are currently overrepresented. I believe Westerners have a long way to go articulating such arterial challenges to national policies in places where they are *citizens* and not Concerned Outsiders, especially where their fellow citizens are more likely to have heard about Amina than about AFRICOM.¹⁷ I believe that Western actions to end policies that continuously cause harm (such as Western food subsidies and food dumping) are more urgent than turning up to help the victims of these policies survive famine and food insecurity with Western aid. I believe this is a position many Westerners would endorse if non-Western Feet were on their own Necks.

My pessimism also results from my encounters with Western feminist and philosophical discourses, some of which fail to notice their Feet, and others of which offer what I find to be problematic or inadequate accounts of Foot Removal. I will offer some examples of such theories in what follows, starting with an example of a concept whose use in feminist contexts I often find frustrating—that of “adaptive preferences.” In her extended critical engagement with the ideas of Martha Nussbaum and Susan Okin, Jaggar notes that Okin and Nussbaum “suggest that women who seem content with unjust cultural practices suffer from adaptive preference or learned desires for things that are harmful, a phenomenon called ‘false consciousness’ by Western feminists influenced by the Marxist critique of ideology” (2005a, 58). Jaggar critiques the mode in which Okin and Nussbaum deploy the notion of “adaptive preferences,” saying:

But raising questions of false consciousness only with respect to non-Western women who defend their cultures could be read as suggesting that these women’s moral perceptions are less reliable than the perceptions of Western women, whose consciousness is supposedly higher or truer. . . . Nussbaum and Okin both recognize explicitly that non-Western women are perfectly capable of criticizing unjust cultural traditions and frequently do precisely that, but their practice of raising questions about adaptive preferences and false consciousness only when confronted by views that oppose their own encourages dismissing those views without considering them seriously. (2005a, 69)

I would like to extend Jaggar’s criticisms by setting out what I find disturbing about the term “adaptive preferences” and the theoretical uses it is put to by some

¹⁷ Those interested in AFRICOM should read Nick Turse’s “The Startling Size of US Military Operations in Africa” (*Mother Jones*, Sept. 6, 2013, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/09/us-military-bases-africa/>).

Western feminists. The terms “adaptive preferences” and “false consciousness” are often used as synonyms by feminists, but I think there is an important difference between them that makes them far from synonymous. As I understand it, “false consciousness” in Marxist theory amounts to a systematic misrepresentation of dominant social and economic relationships, a misrepresentation which, while inimical to the interests of the exploited classes and conducive to the interests of their exploiters, is a form of consciousness that *both* members of dominant classes and members of subordinate classes can suffer from.¹⁸ What is disanalogous in Nussbaum’s and Okin’s uses of “adaptive preferences” is its one-sidedness—the privileged are *not afflicted* by it, and it *uniquely afflicts* the oppressed. It is not my task here to defend or critique the Marxist theory of false consciousness. I merely want to point out that it has the minimal virtue of suggesting that the material oppression suffered by exploited workers, in tandem with critical analyses offered by Marxist theory, renders workers *more likely* to critique and recover from false consciousness than their exploiters. Since the term “adaptive preferences” suggests that oppressed people are *less likely* to “get things right,” it can help support the view that the desires and preferences of poor non-Western women might be discounted by the more fortunate, including Western feminist philosophers, because, as Jaggar notes with respect to Nussbaum, “they are an unreliable guide to justice and the good life” (2005a, 59). In short, “adaptive preferences” could function in even more problematic ways than “false consciousness.”

My biggest problem “adaptive preferences” is both an asymmetry and a “mote and beam” problem—the resolutely one-sided insistence on *oppression as a source of preference-distortion* is accompanied by a resolute refusal to focus on *privilege as a serious, ubiquitous, and problematic source of preference-distortion*. This refusal is all the stranger because most theories of oppression, feminism included, often have as their *starting point* an analysis of the ways in which forms of privilege distort not only the preferences of *privileged subjects*, but their expectations, entitlements, and understandings of how things work. Feminist texts are full of analyses of how patriarchy distorts the expectations and sense of entitlement and worldviews of patriarchs; theories of white supremacy are replete with examples of analogous distortions engendered by white privilege.

¹⁸ Addressing the development of the concepts of “ideology” and “false consciousness” in the works of Marxist scholars like Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs and members of the Frankfurt School, Ron Eyerman (1981, 43) offers an important conceptual clarification when he says, “False consciousness came to mean a distorted and limited form of experience in society that could be applied to all social groups and classes; ideology was applied to those explanations offered by intellectuals to legitimate such experience.”

Acquaintance with these analyses should suggest that people with problematically placed Feet are less-than-ideal candidates for making evaluative judgments about the preferences or welfare of those on whose Necks they stand. In what follows, I will suggest some ways in which privileges associated with problematically placed Feet might produce interesting distortions in theories of justice.

One of the distortions produced by Western privilege is, I would argue, Susan Moller Okin's easy distinction between Western "liberal" societies and "illiberal" non-Western cultures and minority /immigrant cultures.¹⁹ The characterization of Western societies as "liberal" might be far from obvious to certain members of Western societies themselves—say to Muslim women being denied the right to veil, to activists engaged in the issues raised by Black Lives Matter, or to trans people forced to use the bathroom of their "biological sex." Jaggar (2005a, 69) notes this issue, saying, "Western cultures certainly are not liberal all the way down—and illiberal values frequently rear above their surfaces." However, the *external* policies of Western countries arguably raise even more pressing questions, ones that strike me as rarely asked. What exactly is "liberal" about Western foreign policies that have a long history of militarily supporting dictators in a variety of non-Western countries, knowingly putting huge sums of aid money into their hands that then predictably flows to Western banks, leaving the poor people of poor countries drowning in national debt that then enables the World Bank to impose conditionalities that undercut national autonomy? Why do these sorts of things that Western countries do outside their borders *not consistently undermine* their standing to be called "liberal?"

Take the debate about the relative contributions of "internal" and "external" factors to the impoverishment of the non-Western poor often found in the work of Thomas Pogge and in discussions of Pogge's work.²⁰ I find myself struggling with what seem to be *unexamined assumptions behind the distinction itself*. I believe that it is very difficult to isolate what counts as "internal factors" in a world where non-

¹⁹ See Okin (1997). Okin's article is also available in Cohen and Howard's (1999) anthology. Several of the contributors to that volume make a similar critical point about Okin's distinction.

²⁰ This debate and the internal/external distinction are central to several of the essays in *Thomas Pogge and His Critics* (Jaggar 2010). Joshua Cohen's "Philosophy, Social Sciences, Global Poverty" (pp. 18–45) and Neera Chandhoke's "How Much Is Enough, Mr. Thomas? How Much Will Ever Be Enough?" (pp. 66–83) are two of the essays in this volume that focus a fair amount on the distinction between "internal" and "external" factors in their discussion of Pogge's work. They put this distinction to very different uses from each other and to very different uses from my points in this essay.

Western dictators and elites depend on the tacit or explicit support of Western powers to impoverish their people and to hide their ill-gotten assets in tax havens. With respect to any non-Western country, the historical time frame one uses, the number of structures one takes account of, the ways in which one understands structural causalities and complicities, all make significant difference to distinguishing between what seem to be “internal factors” and what appear “external.” I worry that the distinction itself takes relatively autonomous Western countries (where it is easier to distinguish internal from external factors) as the norm, effacing the ways in which their intrusive relationships to their Others makes the distinction difficult to apply outside Western contexts. How does one even begin to determine when and how and why the actions of a non-Western dictator who has secured his position through Western support amount to “internal” or “external” factors?

If we lived in a world where all countries were relatively equal in power, it might make sense to judge whether a country was “liberal” or “democratic” by only looking at policies internal to the country itself. But we arguably live in a world where some countries that might be relatively “liberal” or “democratic” in terms of internal policies have long histories of supporting many overtly illiberal, undemocratic, and dictatorial regimes in other countries. It is striking to me how these external policies do not ever undermine their standing as liberal democracies. A quick look at the criteria used by the Democracy Index to rank the state of democracy in 167 countries will serve to confirm my point—their external policies do not appear to count in these rankings.²¹

The standing of Western nations to be counted as “liberal” and “democratic” despite what they do outside their borders affects Western theories of global justice in ways I find disturbing. I will try to describe some of my problems and begin by using as an example Thomas Pogge’s analysis of the international resource privilege. This is the privilege whereby rulers of a country have the power to sell the natural resources of a country, regardless of how they came to power. Pogge is concerned about non-Western dictators who use this privilege to sell their country’s natural resources, often to Western countries and corporations, impoverishing their own people and profiting privately.²² Pogge (2002, 114) calls for boycotts whereby Western countries and corporations will not purchase natural resources from such dictators, denying them the ability to profit off such resource privilege. Pogge is

²¹ For a good overview of the criteria employed, see the Wikipedia entry for “Democracy Index” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index).

²² Leif Wenar (2010, 128) sees the international resource privilege as one of the two features of the global order that Pogge sees as “particularly ripe for reform.” The other is the international borrowing privilege, which I do not address in this essay.

clearly a philosopher who is conscious about the weight of Western Feet on non-Western Necks. However, I think there are disturbing asymmetries in some of his solutions as to how the removal of these Feet should proceed.

From Pogge's description, readers might be tempted to see the resource privilege problem as a result of transactions between two *equally culpable* parties, given that both profit off the transactions and do so in callous disregard of the global poor. But when one thinks of other factors that Pogge himself mentions along the way—such as the fact that Western powers are often responsible for these dictators coming to power and responsible for maintaining them in power via arms sales—one might conclude that Western states and corporations are even more culpable, given their roles in creating and maintaining the existence of the other culpable party, the dictator.²³ In addition, while a particular non-Western dictator typically impoverishes those who constitute the citizens of his own country, a particular Western power that aids and abets a multiplicity of dictators in several non-Western countries arguably impoverishes a greater number of people overall. While I have no problems with Pogge's call for non-Western dictators being denied such resource privilege, I do have "asymmetry problems" with Pogge's proposed solutions for how the resource privilege issue should be handled.

Pogge proposes two different policies as conjoint solutions to the resource privilege problem, and I will set them out very briefly. First, he proposes that resource-rich fledgling democracies pass amendments to their constitutions declaring that "only its constitutionally democratic governments may effect legally valid transfers of ownership rights in public property" (2002, 169). Second, Pogge proposes an independent and international "Democracy Panel" that will judge whether countries are sufficiently constitutionally legitimate and democratic for their leaders to enjoy resource privilege, and thus warranted in selling its natural resources with legitimacy. Pogge sees these steps as ensuring that (Western) purchasers would be on notice as to when resource purchases from a country are illicit and face a variety of possible legal consequences if they purchase illicit resources (2002, 162). What strikes me about these twin proposals is that they both "regulate" non-Western, potentially dictatorial countries to a significant degree in order to establish the legitimacy of their resource sales to Western purchasers but that there is no suggestion of regulating Western countries in identical ways that might provide them with reasons for caution about the legitimacy of their resource purchases. Why, for instance, does Pogge not call for a constitutional amendment to Western constitutions that makes it unconstitutional for them to aid and abet dictators coming to power elsewhere and to buy resources from dictators when

²³ See for instance Pogge's *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2002, 148), where he gives a scathing account of Western countries trading with such tyrants.

they do? Why might Pogge’s independent and international Democracy Panel not have the jurisdiction to use the *external* policies of Western nations to adjudicate whether *they* warrant being considered “sufficiently democratic” to legitimately sell their own resources? My earlier point about the standing of Western powers to be counted as “liberal” and “democratic” despite what they do outside their borders is, I think, arguably part of the answer to why such proposals seldom appear in philosophical discussion.²⁴

It strikes me as a noteworthy asymmetry that no Western philosopher I know of has even suggested that Western nations to be subject to penalties with respect to *their own resource privileges* for their roles in aiding and abetting non-Western dictators from coming to power and for trading with them. The fact that global trade would be radically undermined by a move that denied resource privileges to Western countries that aid and abet dictators does not strike me as sufficient moral reason for a theory of global justice to totally ignore this possibility.²⁵ That Western nations who are powerful players on the global scene appear to be inoculated *even in theory* against certain penalties that are to be deployed against relatively less-powerful non-Western countries strikes me as a

²⁴ Pogge is prolific, making it difficult to keep track of the ways in which his “solutions” evolve over time in various pieces of work. In a more recent piece, Pogge’s description of the resource privilege problem, as well as his solution to it, appears to have changed in some ways. I do not think they have changed for the better. Pogge (writing with Mitu Sengupta) says, “The populations of some less developed countries suffer from massive natural resource outflows that are not approved by or beneficial to the people. States shall agree that future such exports will be vetted by a Southern Resource Export Expert Committee to determine whether they are acceptable to or serve the interests of the population. Should the committee find that neither condition is met, then subsequent acquisitions are to be discouraged and partly compensated for by requiring buyers to pay a percentage of the value of the acquired natural resources into the Human Development Fund” (Pogge and Sengupta 2014, 10). I will content myself with noting that I cannot begin to imagine Northern countries agreeing to a Northern Resource Export Expert Committee that would vet whether their own natural resource outflows were “approved by or beneficial to” their people.

²⁵ It might be salutary for Western subjects to notice that the boycott, a term which has its origins in the Irish Land War and was made famous by its use by Mahatma Gandhi’s Swadeshi movement against British colonial rule, has under the current conditions of the global economy devolved into “trade sanctions” that can only be imposed (in anything approaching a “total boycott”) on relatively powerless countries by relatively powerful ones.

disturbing asymmetry. I suspect that some notion of “feasibility” is at work here that would explain why these moves to subject Western countries to constitutional amendments or potential losses of their resource privileges never occur.

I am aware that the issue of “feasibility” is endemic in theorizing about changes to the global order required by a theory of global justice. I cannot robustly engage with this issue here, but I do want to note that it is not well defined. I admit that my own sense of what is “feasible” seems far more pessimistic than those of many who write in this area. While I find many proposals in the work of Pogge and philosophers who respond to his work intellectually interesting, I do not find myself convinced they are “feasible” in the sense of “likely to actually happen any time soon.”²⁶ I do not see poor non-Western nations rushing to pass Pogge’s constitutional amendment any more than I see their Western counterparts passing the constitutional amendment I suggested. I do not see Pogge’s version of the Democracy Panel being set up any more than I do mine. I would concede that, at an abstract level, there appear to be fewer obstacles in the way of pushing poor non-Western countries to line up for Pogge’s proposals than in the way of getting affluent Western countries to accept mine. But I am not sure exactly how such considerations, which seem to be considerations about *power*, translate into considerations pertinent to a theory of global *justice*. I wonder whether something akin to the point I made earlier in my discussion of “adaptive preferences”—about

²⁶ Pogge’s solutions often call for the setting up of funds to which Western nations will be required to contribute and whose proceeds are to be used to lift the non-Western “global poor” out of poverty. One of the earliest calls for such a fund is in “Eradicating Systemic Poverty: Brief for A Global Resources Dividend” (Pogge 2001). This fund was to gain its proceeds from a GRD “tax” on commodities disproportionately overconsumed by Western nations such as oil. The Human Development Fund he calls for in his 2014 essay (Pogge and Sengupta 2014) proposes to get its funds from what appear to be fines imposed for Western “bad behavior” including Western protectionism and subsidies, arms exports that fuel conflicts, civil wars and repression, sham transactions and mispriced trades, and buying resources from less-developed countries which are not approved by or beneficial to their people. Since none of these funds seem likely to be set up any time soon, I continue to wonder what “feasibility” amounts to in philosophical theory. Leif Wenar (2010, 127) argues that “one can see the issue of feasibility absorbing increasing amounts of Pogge’s attention as his work on global justice has unfolded over the past 20 years.” I think Wenar is correct in his assessment of the increasing role of “feasibility” in Pogge’s work, but I am unconvinced that most of Pogge’s solutions are likely to happen any time soon or that they would work as Pogge envisions.

how privilege might function to distort the preferences of the privileged—might be relevant to the issue of what strikes different people as “feasible.” I worry that the notion of “feasibility” might serve to mask or perpetuate power inequalities between countries and to keep people more focused on the question “What good might ‘we’ hope to persuade the powerful to do sometime soon?” overshadowing the very different question “What does global economic justice require?” I fear that such theories may serve to move Western Feet to moral high ground more than to dislodge them from non-Western Necks.)

As I stated earlier, I have sympathy with Jaggar’s call to Westerners to focus on their Feet, although I am leery about their interpreting this injunction as one more reason for Doing Good in faraway countries. Likewise, I appreciate Pogge’s work insofar as it focuses attention on the contribution of Western Feet to the weight on non-Western Necks, even though I have serious reservations about many of his “solutions.” So, one of my conclusions in this paper is that there is perhaps more to think about and worry about with respect to the ways in which Westerners think they should dislodge their Feet from non-Western Necks. One overarching worry connects to the asymmetry I began discussing at the start of this paper—that Western subjects are constructed as having obligations to morally and politically intervene on issues in non-Western contexts, while non-Western subjects are not constructed with a symmetrical obligation with respect to Western contexts. I will circle back to that asymmetry now.

In discourses about global poverty, the non-Western global poor occupy a position reminiscent of the position poor non-Western women occupy in Nussbaum’s and Okin’s use of the term “adaptive preferences.” I often feel that the global poor, like poor non-Western women, enter the texts to testify to “our” understanding of their suffering, abjection and degradation—a result of acute poverty in the former case and a result of patriarchal oppression in the latter. Thereafter, they recede into the margins while “we” figure out what policies might serve to improve their situations. Unlike the problematic moves that Nussbaum and Okin make with respect to “adaptive preferences,” philosophical discourses on global poverty like Pogge’s do not “overtly” discount “their” preferences and do a much better job of pointing to “our” contributions to “their” problems. While the Pogge-type philosophical discourses on the global poor seem better in these two respects, I remain anxious about the dominant place that continues to be held by Concerned Westerners, whose understandings, analyses, sensibilities, and solutions dominate the stage. I remain anxious about the corollary absence of the global poor.

I even begin to worry about the metaphor of Western Feet on non-Western Necks, since it might suggest a picture where non-Western subjects are immobilized and voiceless until owners of Western Feet move them at least a little. The metaphor might also suggest that owners of Western Feet are best positioned to

figure out how to remove those Feet and that they are not in need of input from the non-Western Necks whose voice-boxes their Feet are squeezing. Less metaphorically, I suspect that an “agency-eradicating” picture of the nature of “poverty oppression” is at work in both Okin-Nussbaum cases and in many discourses about the global poor. These discourses portray poverty as depriving the poor of access to the forms of knowledge and political understandings they need to provide meaningful input on how their conditions might be improved. On this picture, “we” have a responsibility to come up with solutions that reduce the abjection produced by patriarchy and/or poverty to a level where these subaltern subjects can *then* come to “have a meaningful voice.” I know that many people find this a “realistic,” albeit regrettable, picture of the abjection produced by poverty, and I also know that many people, including myself, react to this picture with moral unease and political queasiness. I tend to think of this difference as one of those unlikely to be resolved by argument.

All I can do is to point to one important source of my uneasiness. None of the political movements that I admire, historical or contemporary, are movements where some segment of the privileged were overwhelmingly in charge of theorizing how to ameliorate the situation of the oppressed, though there are examples of people from the ranks of the privileged who supported these movements. I am thinking of a range of movements from anticolonial movements to movements for racial equality to feminist movements to movements fighting for the welfare of sexual and gender minorities. In all these movements, those from the ranks of people suffering from the set of systemic injustices centrally addressed by the movement were well represented in both leadership roles and in the taking of political action. In the “movement” to end global poverty, at least as I encounter it in philosophical discourses and academic corridors, the intellectual work of figuring out what global justice requires and what Westerners owe their non-Western Others is heavily dominated by affluent Westerners, whose theoretical picture of the subjectivity of the non-Western poor likely excuses their absence. That bothers me: it taps into worries I have expressed earlier, both about the distorting “adaptive preferences of the privileged” and about the one-sided concerns for one’s Others rooted in colonial history.

More than a decade has passed since Jaggar’s “Saving Amina” essay. Yet many in the West, including philosophers and feminists, still have a lot to learn about the ways in which their Feet are on non-Western Necks. They have perhaps even more to learn about the problems that might beset their attempts at theorizing how to remove their Feet. I have used my odd positionality as a person whose Feet have turned Western but whose Head retains enough non-Western elements to hurt in the presence of certain aspects of Western feminist and philosophical

theories, to point to some of these problems. Philosophers must, I suppose, continue to reinterpret the world even if their interpretations do little to change it.

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