WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER

Pratibha Parmar interviews Trinh T. Minh-ha

Trinh T. Minh-ha is a writer, film-maker and composer. She emigrated from Vietnam to the United States in 1970 after a year at the University of Saigon, and continued her studies of music and composition, French literature and ethnomusicology in the US and later in Paris. She taught music for three years at the National Conservatory of Music in Dakar, Senegal.

She is currently Associate Professor of Cinema at San Francisco State University. Her vast body of work includes the books Un Art sans oeuvre *(1981),* En Miniscules *(poems, 1987)* African Spaces: Designs for Living in Upper Volta *(1985) in collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier, and the films* Reassemblage *(1982),* Naked Spaces, Living is Round *(1985) and* Surname Viet Given Name Nam *(1989). An essay by her entitled 'Difference: "A special Third World women issue"' was published in* Feminist Review *No. 25, 1987.*

Her most recent publication is Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism *(1989). Pratibha Parmar spoke to her in Berkeley, California, about 'cultural hybridization and decentred realities, fragmented selves and multiple identities, marginal voices and languages of rupture', all of which are issues raised in the book and in Minh-ha's films.*

Pratibha: I would like to start by asking you how you place yourself as a Third World woman *vis-à-vis* the women's movement.

Minh-ha: Well, it took me many pages in the book to develop this. The fact is that we are standing on a very precarious line. I see the women's movement as being necessarily heterogeneous in its origin, even though it may be claimed more readily by certain groups and remains largely white in its visibility. On the one hand, I readily acknowledge my debt to the movement in all the reflections advanced on the oppression of

women of colour. On the other hand, I also feel that a critical space of differentiation needs to be maintained since issues specifically raised by Third World women have less to do with questions of cultural difference than with a different notion of feminism itself – how it is lived and how it is practiced. Naming yourself a feminist is not without problems, even among feminists. In a context of marginalization, at the same time as you feel the necessity to call yourself a feminist while fighting for the situation of women, you also have to keep a certain latitude and to refuse that label when feminism tends to become an occupied territory. Here, you refuse, not because you don't want to side with other feminists, but simply because it is crucial to keep open the space of naming in feminism.

Pratibha: The back-cover blurb on the book jacket of *Woman, Native, Other* describes the book as 'postfeminist'. I find this term problematic, because my understanding of it within the context of England is that it is a term used by the mainstream media as a way of denigrating current feminist practices. Furthermore, it also carries with it the notion that feminism is dead and is no longer a viable or necessary social movement. Can you say what you think about this and how you use the term?

Minh-ha: This is an important question. Actually, I don't know how the word popped up on the back cover of the book, except that the first subtitle I thought of included it as well as the words 'Third World' which reviewers also strongly rejected. Its reappearance here is the publisher's choice, not mine. I took it out at an early stage, not so much because I distrust its use but because, precisely as you said, it raises a number of confusing interpretations. I fear that one does not even need to go to the context of England to see how it can be condemned by certain feminists. Within feminism, there are, as in all movements, women whose questioning of the dominant system constantly pushes to the outer limits of what feminism is and what it is not. But you also have others who just hop on the wagon and are likely to turn feminism into a rigidly prescriptive practice, perpetuating thereby the same power relations as those established in the patriarchal system. Feminism is thus weakened in its political undertaking as it is reduced to something as simplistic and essentialist as man-hating. Sure, the mainstream is always very quick to appropriate subversive strands for their own conservative end, but one need not fall prey to this. For me, the notion of postfeminism is as problematic, but also as interesting, as the notion of postmodernism through which, for example, the definition of modernism keeps on being displaced in its certainties. Therefore, postmodernism cannot be reduced to something that merely comes *after* modernism or to a simple rejection of modernism. As some theorists argue, it can point back to a nascent stage of modernism, a dawning stage before the closure, in other words, a stage in between closures. Postfeminism in this context is both a return to a nascent stage of feminism where the movement is at its most subversive, and a move forward to a stage in which we have learned from the many difficulties we've encountered

that, in spite of all the refinements of sexist ideology, the fight is far from being over. It has, on the contrary, become so much more complex now that the movement has reached an impasse on the issue of essentialism, whether this idea of an innate 'womanness' is defined by men or championed by women.

Pratibha: In your book, as in your films, you critically engage with the 'problem' of how to represent a Third World female 'other'. This critical engagement with certain 'master discourses' leads you to interrogate anthropology, deconstructionist philosophy, postcolonial literary criticism and feminist theory. In relation to feminist theory it is quite clear that Black women and 'women of colour' have shifted the frameworks of what was once the dominant trajectory of the eurocentric, middle-class and white women's movement both in the US and in Europe. Would you agree that we have instigated these shifts through our interventions, our writings, our political practices?

Minh-ha: As I mentioned earlier, I don't believe the movement to be other than heterogeneous in its origins. In fact, this is the condition of *any* socio-political or aesthetic movement. That's why history and culture keep on having to be rewritten. Because of their more privileged status, white feminists have been taking up this task more extensively, but the women's movement resulted from the works of both white

JEAN-PAUL BOURDIER

Trinh T. Minh-ha

women and women of colour around the world. Now that more women of colour have access to education, there will be more and more rewriting work to be done on our side. (This is not an easy situation to be in since, as I wrote in the book, writing is always practised at the cost of other women's labour.) Moreover, the influence has always been mutual: if women of colour have at times taken their cue from white women's sexual politics, their fight has consistently contributed to the radicalization of the feminist struggle. As you put it, it continues to shift the framework of Euro-American feminism and, depending on how the work is carried out, the refocus on women of colour in white feminist discourse lately can be seen as a simultaneous form of appropriation and expropriation, or as an acknowledgement of intercultural enrichment and of interdependency in the fighting-learning process. The precarious line we walk on is one that allows us to challenge the West as authoritative subject of feminist knowledge, while also resisting the terms of a binarist discourse that would concede feminism to the West all over again.

Pratibha: What I find very exciting about your book is the fact that there's a seamless quality between your subjective perceptions of fragmentation, your questioning of language and of identity as a postcolonial subject, and the more structured processes of how you give those experiences a theoretical coherence. In other words, organic to your theoretical project is your very personal voice which is integrated poignantly and often self-reflectively.

What is also quite unique is the way you use poetical language and engage with writings of women of colour, be they prose, poetry, autobiography or philosophical and theoretical texts. Can you talk more about this?

Minh-ha: You put it very nicely. This will help to give another dimension to what I am about to discuss. What you find exciting in this 'theoretical project', to use your own terms, seems precisely to be the source of problems I have repeatedly encountered while seeking publication of the book. Aside from the fact that its subject appeared to be of little interest and relevance to publishers in general, what was widely rejected both by publishers and readers to whom they sent the book for reports was the way I chose to write. Never had I experienced so extensively, at least in intellectual matters, the dilemma of crossing borderlines. Academics, infatuated with their own normalization of what constitutes a 'scholarly' work, abhor any form of writing that exceeds academic language and whose mode of theorizing is not recognizable, hence not classifiable as 'theory' according to their standard of judgement. Likewise, the militant presses also reject it because it does not square with the rhetoric of militancy and its insistence on literal thinking, while the feminist presses refuse it because either it is 'too speculative to be a useful textbook for institutions' or it is simply 'not quite what we are looking for'. Last, but not least, the small presses focusing on creative writing condemn the

book for being too 'impure'. In other words, what bothers all these presses is its 'impurity': the irrespectful mixing of theoretical, militant and poetical modes of writing.

Part of the fight carried on in the book is to show how theory can relate intimately to poetry; how they interact when meaning is prevented from becoming dogma or from ending with what is said, thereby unsettling the identity of the speaking/writing/reading subject in the signifying process. Theorists tend to react strongly against poetry today because, for them, poetry is nothing else but a place where a subjectivity is constituted and where language is aestheticized (such as building vocabulary and rhyming beautiful lines). Whereas poetry is also the place from which many people of colour voice their struggle. Consider Cuban and African poetry, for example. And if you look into Asian, Hispanic, African and Native American literatures here in the US, poetry is no doubt the major voice of the poor and of people of colour. So poetical language does become stale and self-indulgent when it serves an art-for-art's-sake purpose, but it can also be the site where language is at its most radical in its refusal to take itself for granted. As feminists have insistently pointed out, women are not only oppressed economically, but also culturally and politically, in the very forms of signifying and reasoning. Language is therefore an extremely important site of struggle. Meaning has to retain its complexities, otherwise it will just be a pawn in the game of power. Even theorists like Julia Kristeva who only write prose, recognize that only in poetical language lies the possibility of revolution. For me, the political responsibility here is to offer meaning in such a way that each reader going through the same statements and the same text, would find tools for herself (or himself) to carry on the fight in her (or his) own terms.

JEAN-PAUL BOURDIER

Trinh T. Minh-ha

Pratibha: At the core of the book lies a questioning of the languages and discourses of the grand narratives of the human sciences which seek to universalize and homogenize. What is interesting here is that rather than constructing an oppositional discourse you move in and out of these languages, challenging, deconstructing and reformulating their suppositions and ideological underpinnings. You say:

> From jagged transitions between the analytical and the poetical to the disruptive, always shifting fluidity of a headless and bottomless storytelling, what is exposed in this text is the inscription and the de-scription of a non unitary female subject of colour through her engagement, therefore also disengagement, with master discourses. (1989: 43)

In many ways, I think it is women of colour who are often best placed to engage and also disengage with master discourses since our entry into the 'master's house' continues to be a forced entry rather than a polite invitation. Also, we don't hold white male, Christian masters as voices of authority and legitimation. What do you think are the consequences for you as an individual who traverses so many theoretical and personal boundaries?

Minh-ha: Perhaps I can answer this question by coming back to an important part which I left out in my earlier response: the role of theory. The situation is not unlike what we said earlier about feminism. You have people who practise theory in a very deadening way, so theory keeps on aiming for closures and building up boundaries rather than voiding them. What is constituted are areas of expertise and specialization, the fortification and expansion of which need a whole network of disciplinarians. I find this particularly true with film theory, for example. It certainly seems to be heading toward a dead end as it tends to become a mere form of administrative inquisition. In reflecting on language(s) as a crucial site for social change, theory should precisely challenge such a compartmentalized view of the world and render perceptible the (linguistic) cracks existing in every argument while questioning the nature of oppression and its diverse manifestations.

This is where disrupting 'the grand narratives of the human sciences' becomes a means of survival, and where a straight oppositional discourse is no longer sufficient. In the book, I came back, for example, to the age-old division between the instinct and the intellect, and briefly discussed theory in relation to how women conceive the 'abstract'. The way I dealt with a nonunitary notion of subjectivity in my film *Naked Spaces, Living is Round* may also contribute further to questioning reductive oppositions. The film has three female voice-overs which constitute, broadly speaking, three ways of informing. One of the voices quotes African writers and villagers' sayings, while another reasons according to writings from the West, and the third tells personal anecdotes and feelings. This analytical differentiation is useful here,

but it is certainly not adequate, since the three voices often overlap in their functions. The first voice is perhaps the most concrete, yet it has a pervasive abstract quality to it. Because it does not inform with a rationale recognizable to the West, Western viewers often either classify it as being 'symbolic' or they decide that it is simply part of an abstract 'intellectualizing' process. I would say that this is not false, but it's not true either. It is not false because representation is here visibly and audibly shown as being mediated by my own background and rationalization of the culture. It is not quite true, because this eagerness to equate the abstract with 'intellectualization' is an impoverishment due to the dominance of the literal mind. When you hear the conversations of these village women, you can never separate the abstract from the concrete, and the level at which signs and symbols operate leads us directly into the very details of their daily existence. This, I believe, is where the power of the poetry of our environment lies. And this is also what theory can achieve when it comes closest to poetry in its signifying operation.

The above example of simultaneous engagement and disengagement with master discourses can indeed, as you point out, be heightened by the fact that our entry into the 'master's house' continues to be a forced entry. Even, and especially, when I visibly walk in the 'centre' with all spotlights on, I feel how utterly inappropriate(d)ly 'other' I remain – not so much by choice nor by lack of choice, as by a mixture of survival instinct and critical necessity. Here, the fact that one is always marginalized in one's own language and areas of strength is something that one has to learn to live with. I can't help noticing this in every single realm of my activities: how I am sent off from one disciplinary border, one classification to another, in academic milieus (never 'quite corresponding to what they are looking for'); how I am categorized in conferences; how I am introduced in diverse public events; how I am viewed and read through my work; how I am rejected and retrieved by different communities; the kind of job I am expected to take on; the institutional territories I am allowed or not allowed to step into; and so on. Impurity and marginalizations have always had strong bonds; the more one strengthens these, the more one's position proves to be fragile. It's nothing new.

Pratibha: I would like to move on to a question about definitions and identities that comes up quite frequently amongst radical postcolonial intellectuals. 'Are we victims of fragmentation or, precisely because of our cultural hybridity and postcolonial experiences of displacement and marginality, are we a synthesis placed very much in the centre?'

Minh-ha: For me it's not a question of fragmentation versus synthesis but, rather, of how one understands what happens within the notion of fragmentation itself. If one sees a fragment as being the opposite of a whole, then I have no affinities with the term, since it carries with it the compartmentalized world view I questioned earlier. But if the fragment stands on its own and cannot be recuperated by the notion of a totalizing whole, then fragmentation is a way of living with differences without

SHAHEEN HAQ

Pratibha Parmar

turning them into opposites, nor trying to assimilate them out of insecurity. Fragmentation is here a useful term because it always points to one's limits. Since the self, like the work you produce, is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself, in the context of cultural hybridity, always pushing one's questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not. When am I Vietnamese? When am I American? When am I Asian and when am I Asian-American or Asian-European? Which language should I speak, which is closest to myself, and when is that language more adequate than another? By working on one's limits, one has the potential to modify them. Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders.

Pratibha: So how would you look at questions of identity – as a woman, as a woman of colour, as a writer or as a film-maker?

Minh-ha: Again, if it is a point of redeparture for those of us whose ethnicity and gender were historically debased, then identity remains necessary as a political/personal strategy of survival and resistance. But if it is essentialized as an end point, a point of 'authentic' arrival, then it only narrows the struggle down to a question of 'alternatives' – that is, a perpetuation, albeit with a reversed focus, of the notion of 'otherness' as defined by the master, rather than a radical challenge of patriarchal power relations. The claim of identity is often a *strategic* claim. It is a process which enables me to question my condition anew, and one by which I intimately come to understand how the personal is cultural, historical or political. The reflexive question asked, as I mentioned earlier, is no longer: *who* am I? but *when, where, how* am I (so and so)? This is why I remain sceptical of strategies of reversal when

they are not intricately woven with strategies of displacement. Here the notion of displacement is also a place of identity: there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of colour and the writer; there are instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity.

Pratibha: I would like to talk about your films more specifically. What would you say is your agenda in terms of your film-making practice? Partly, I'm asking this as a way of going back to what we were saying earlier about the dominant culture being in many ways a mainstream fiction. I think the kind of work you are producing in your films and your writing is actually changing the cultural topography of visual discourses.

Minh-ha: It is difficult to talk about a single agenda in my film-making. Each work engenders its own agenda. I can try, however, to trace some of the preoccupations that run through the different works produced. For example, I wrote *Woman, Native, Other* at approximately the same time I made my earlier films, and yet I was committed to not mentioning film in this book because I was dealing with writing rather than film-making. But in both filmic and written works, the attempt is to reflect on the tools and the relations of production that define us, whether as film-makers or as writers. By doing so, what I hope for is to provide myself and others with tools not only to beat the master at his own game, but also to transform the terms of our consciousness. Since my films are not materializations of ideas or visions that precede them, the way they take shape entirely depends on what happens during and in between the process(es) of producing them. Therefore, what it is about can never be separated from how it is made.

Let's take the example of my latest film, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. It is a work in which a number of questions tightly intersect: identity, popular memory, culture(s). In focusing on Vietnamese women in Vietnam and in the States, I was interested in exploring how we project ourselves through our own stories and analyses as well as how we are constituted through the image-repertoire that insiders and outsiders to the culture have historically fashioned and retained of us. Here the role of popular memory and of oral tradition remains pivotal in the film as it allows me to offer the viewer, not some 'factual' information on the condition of women and on the history of their resistance, but songs, proverbs, stories that bring to the fore their oppression, their struggle and highlight how and what people remember of them. While breaching the question of plural identity for example, the film works simultaneously at different levels on the intersection of nation and gender; on the problems of translation within a culture as well as between several cultures; on the politics of interviews with its emphasis on oral testimonies and its 'voice-giving' claims; and finally on the fictions of documentary.

All this being said, I feel that in trying to respond to your statement, hence to look for a specific agenda, to explain, contain, or justify it, I am simply led to this banal question: why write? why make film? There is obviously no single answer to this. Perhaps it is not so much a question of 'making' as that of allowing things to be (or not to be) and to take form on their own. Perhaps resistance in this context is not to go against, but to assume a difficult 'freedom', one that also refutes itself as freedom.

Notes

Pratibha Parmar is a writer and film-maker. She was one of the guest editors of *Perverse Politics: Feminist Review*, No. 34 (1990).

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