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# Disrupting the center: interrogating an 'Asian feminist' identity

Lenore T. Lyons

*University of Wollongong*, [lenorel@uow.edu.au](mailto:lenorel@uow.edu.au)

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# **Disrupting the Centre: Interrogating an 'Asian Feminist' Identity<sup>1</sup>**

Lenore Lyons

## **Abstract**

The problem of 'difference' has emerged as a significant issue in western feminist theory making during the past two decades. In response to claims that mainstream feminism has ignored the lives and voices of third world women and women of colour, attention has increasingly been placed on the ways in which class and 'race' intersect in the everyday lived experiences of women. This work has sought to displace the hegemonic control of white, western women in the production of feminist knowledge. Despite a growing body of literature on women's movements throughout the Asian region, however, common-sense perceptions of Asian 'submissiveness' and 'coercion' continue to dominate dialogues between Australian and Asian women. Through an examination of a women's rights organisation in Singapore, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), this paper calls into question dominant assumptions about 'Asian feminism'. By examining the numerous ways in which feminism is contested I argue that to view Singaporean women's choices within a model of tradition/modernity or Asian/Western values sets up a false dichotomy of choice that only serves to reinforce the centre-periphery model of western and Other feminisms.

## **Disrupting the Centre: Interrogating an ‘Asian Feminist’ Identity**

This paper has emerged in response to comments that have been made by Anglo-Australian feminists about my work on the women’s movement in Singapore. In particular, questions such as ‘Is there really a feminist movement in Singapore?’ and ‘How feminist are they really?’. Why are Anglo-Australian feminists, now part of a global movement of feminisms, still incredulous about the appearance of ‘native’ feminists in Southeast Asia? I believe that these questions about whether the Asian feminist ‘really’ exists point to the use of a sometimes unspoken but more often overt feminist index scale in western feminist thought about other feminisms. This is despite the fact that increasing numbers of studies have focused on the emergence of feminist or women’s rights movements in different parts of the world (see Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983; Jayawardena, 1986; Grewal et al., 1988; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, 1991; Basu, 1995; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). While representatives from women’s organisations in many different countries have attended the four UN conferences on women, it seems that many first world feminists are still unwilling to extend to these women the label ‘feminist’ (Tinker and Jaquette, 1987). Such attempts to clearly delineate ‘feminist’ identities occur against the backdrop of a critique of ‘white, western, middle-class feminism’ by third world women and women of colour (see O’Shane, 1976; Bethel, 1979; hooks, 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Carby, 1983). The ensuing debate that emerged around these critiques came to be known as the ‘politics of difference’. Many women claim that in the name of sisterhood, western feminisms have overlooked two related concerns - the absence of empirical data that examines *their* lives, and the failure of feminist theory to recognise the role of ‘race’, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in systems of power and domination.

The difference debate largely centres around ‘race’ and ethnicity as markers of women’s exclusion, although class, sexuality, age and (dis)ability are also included. This focus helps to explain the use of such categories as ‘white feminism’, ‘western

feminism', 'Anglo-feminism', 'third world feminism', and 'women of colour' to represent the various places taken up by women engaged in the difference debate. These terms are not meant to suggest precise ethnic, racial or cultural identities, but rather they describe a "position in a structural hierarchical interrelationship" (Ang, 1995:60). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991:52) uses the categories 'western feminism' and 'third world feminism' to highlight the textual strategies used by writers "which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western". For Mohanty, these are 'imagined communities' held together by an oppositional politics, and for this reason she includes indigenous, migrant and minority women from the 'west' in the category 'third world'. Not all women thus labelled accept her categorisation, preferring instead to distinguish between first world 'women of colour' and third world women. They argue that while 'third world' focuses attention on the power differentials between privileged western feminists and 'other' women, it obscures the differences between relatively privileged Black, Chicana, Asian and non-Anglo women in the west and women of the so-called 'two-thirds world'. Using the terms 'women of colour' or 'minority women' to refer to non-Anglo women in the 'west' nonetheless signifies these women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitutes their potential commonality (see Sandoval, 1991).

At the same time, however, such terms must be used with great care in order to avoid homogenising 'us' while exploring 'their' heterogeneity. An important part of this task involves examining the distinction between whiteness and westernness. Ien Ang (1995:65) comments that, "Whiteness and Westernness are closely interconnected; they are two sides of the same coin. Westernness is the sign of white hegemony at the international level, where non-white, non-Western nations are by definition subordinated to white, Western ones". The process of distinguishing between the two is fraught - 'whiteness' "breaks apart and shifts to synonyms as soon as one attempts to bring it into focus" (Wong, 1994:139). In contrast, the term 'western' actively resists such fragmentation at the same time that it tightens the rules of admission (both literally and figuratively). In a move to destabilise the term 'western' and thus open it up to more thorough examination, Indian emigrant to the United States, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1989) calls for 'Western feminists' to examine who 'we' are.

It is important to acknowledge those traditions which are glossed over in the homogenous category 'western feminism'. The strong feminist traditions of the Second World (the non-oriental 'Eastern' bloc) and the emerging post-communist states are largely ignored in 'western' feminist literature (see Heitlinger, 1999). In addition, the writings of other non-English speaking European feminists, except for the ubiquitous 'French Feminists', have failed to find a place in what Renate Holub (1994:239) refers to as 'big-time feminist theory'. Instead, English language feminism has dominated international feminism, and it is feminism's mainstream, largely Anglophone tradition that I am referring to by my use of the terms 'white' and 'western' feminism. This does not mean that non-Anglophone European feminisms are less implicated in these processes, nor that the problem of difference is peripheral to their own intellectual traditions. I use the term 'Anglo-Australian' to refer to such a tradition within Australian feminism.

What is also lost in these groupings are the interrelated markers of class, sexuality, age, and disability. While the politics of difference is about *all* the ways in which women are different from each other, the common language of the debate (as evidenced in this terminology) masks most differences. I am not suggesting that other differences are *not* addressed by the literature, but that the way in which women are classified in it often renders these differences invisible. The tendency to lump differences together (and thus produce 'difference') is symptomatic of the trend within certain sections of white, western feminism to see the Other as an undifferentiated mass. In an act of homogenisation, the diversity of these critiques is often overlooked or ignored through reference to the common problem of 'difference'. In this 'grab-bag' approach to diversity the specificities of 'other' women's claims are lost as white feminism re-centres its own concerns.

I want to argue that such a process of re-centring can help to explain the responses of some Anglo-Australian feminists to the notion of 'Asian feminism'. Within Anglo-Australian feminist discourse, the process by which white Australian women come to self-identify as feminists is often viewed as relatively transparent; 'becoming' a feminist is a matter of conviction, mediated by class, race and sexuality (see Bulbeck,

1997). Provided with opportunities for education and employment, and unburdened by an oppressive patriarchal culture, Australian women are relatively 'free' to choose a feminist identity. Socio-cultural background, life experience, and sexual orientation become the most significant determinants of whether women actually 'do it'. According to this view, Asian feminists are by definition an exceptional group.<sup>2</sup> Caught within multiple and shifting discourses that serve to inscribe place, allegiance and behaviour (under the rubric of 'culture' and 'tradition'), being an Asian feminist is necessarily fraught. Hence the view that: 'Few women in Singapore openly embrace the label feminist', is at once a statement of authentic Singaporean female experience - the submissive Asian woman - and a reference to the Singaporean state - one party authoritarian control. Given the juxtaposition of these two 'facts', Anglo-Australian women at once understand and empathise with the Singaporean woman as non-feminist. This paper raises questions about the ways in which dominant constructions of Asian womanhood preclude a more complex reading of the processes by which Singaporean women come to adopt a 'feminist' identity. By examining these two tropes of Asian feminist identity – traditional submissiveness and state control - I argue that to view Singaporean women's choices within a model of tradition versus modernity or Asian versus Western values sets up a false dichotomy of choice facing Singaporean feminists. By examining the problems and issues facing Singaporean women who choose to identify as feminist I argue for a more complex reading of both culture/tradition and state control. In doing so, I take up Chandra Mohanty's (1991:39) call to "'pivot' the center of feminist analyses, to suggest new beginnings and middles, and to argue for more finely honed historical and context-specific feminist methods".

## **Becoming a 'Singaporean Feminist'**

This research is based on an extensive study of the Singaporean women's organisation the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) both as a member and an 'outside' researcher over a four-year period (1994-1997). The data is gathered from a lengthy survey questionnaire of the entire membership, interviews, a focus session, and documentary analysis.<sup>3</sup> Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multi-

racial organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. Full membership to AWARE is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 21 years of age.<sup>4</sup> Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign men and women without permanent residency may join as associate members or 'Friends of AWARE'.

AWARE describes its role as primarily one of research, discussion and support. This is to be achieved by making both men and women aware of the barriers that they face in their everyday lives as a result of gender discrimination. Thus, the AWARE Constitution (1990:1) states the following three general objectives of the society:

- 1) to promote the awareness and participation of women in all areas;
- 2) to promote the attainment of full equality;
- 3) to promote equal opportunities for women.

In pursuing these goals, however, AWARE must maintain an explicitly non-political profile. Among the prohibitions listed in the Constitution are those against engaging in political activity (Clause 24e). This is a standard clause inserted into the constitutions of all officially registered societies. For an organisation such as AWARE which sees itself performing an important role in civil society, this clause is instrumental in determining both the association's public 'presentation of self', as well as its internal decision-making. In the first instance, being barred from making political statements means that AWARE cannot comment on issues outside the interests of its specifically defined constituency. But, as Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng-Huat (1995:208) comments, associations such as AWARE cannot avoid 'political' issues when speaking on women's status. The constraints of the Societies' Act mean, however, that such statements must remain reformist in character. Consequently, AWARE's existence continues to be conditional upon acceptance of the government's own ground rules of 'consensus' ahead of 'confrontation' (Rodan, 1993:94). This often requires a 'back door' approach in which AWARE gently and quietly lobbies the state, and sits back as the government takes the praise for 'its' latest idea. Such an approach has seen reform on matters related to family violence and discrimination, but the losses continue to out-number the gains. AWARE's greatest role, however, has been in the area of consciousness-raising, counselling and

support services, and putting 'women's issues' on the political agenda via public forums, letters to the editor, or private approaches to government Ministers.

While AWARE is commonly recognised as the first Singaporean feminist organisation, neither the terms 'feminist' nor 'feminism' appear in the AWARE Declaration and Constitution (AWARE, 1990). Instead, AWARE is advertised as a 'women's' or 'women's rights' organisation. At the same time, however, the majority of the membership agrees that the organisation is feminist in both goals and orientation. This seeming contradiction stems from an astute political awareness of the negative connotations that the term 'feminist' holds in the public consciousness. Such a strategy is not uncommon in other parts of the world. Many third world women are wary of feminism's association with western cultural imperialism and are understandably cautious of associating their activities or organisations with the feminist label (see Mernissi, 1987; Enloe, 1989; Accad, 1991; Kandiyoti, 1991; Heng, 1997). The more neutral 'woman's rights' or 'woman's organisation' may be more socially and politically acceptable. Others have attempted to re-define feminism, arguing that a narrowly defined feminism that focuses on gender as the primary source of oppression is inadequate and inappropriate to their lives and struggles. As Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991:319) comments, the "fundamental issue of Third World women is not generally whether there is a need for feminism, ie., a general movement which seeks to redress women's oppression, but rather what the definition and agenda of that feminism will be".

The women I spoke to in AWARE were keenly aware of the negative images the public associated with the term feminism, in particular its association with 'Western values' and thus the state's own discourse of Western versus 'Asian values'. Some of the words and phrases associated with public perceptions of feminism include: militant, lesbian, bra-burning, anti-men, Western, high-brows, Western educated, middle-class, man-hating, sexually promiscuous, feminists are people who are really not women, really aggressive, women who don't shave their legs, liberals, radicals, women with a chip on their shoulders, ranting and raving, making noise.<sup>5</sup> As former AWARE President Constance Singam (1993:2) says, "Feminists? Loud-mouthed man-haters with unshaved legs. Feminists are lesbians and just not nice". Press



reportage of AWARE events and personalities relies on these stereotypes. A 1990 feature article on Singam was titled “She’s feminine and a feminist”. The article said that,

Ms Singam defies everything one would expect from a hardline feminist. *She wears a bra.* But no shoulder pads or trousers. She laughs girlishly, sometimes with a hand cupped over her eyebrow. So gracious. So full of feminine charm (Ng, 1990:10, emphasis added).

The press is quick to play up the ‘feminine’ qualities of high profile members. During her term as AWARE President, attention was often drawn to Claire Chiang’s beauty. In a 1993 article she was described as an “Activist of silk and substance” (Ibrahim, 1993:3). But, the media have not always portrayed AWARE members in such a favourable light. During the early Mediawatch campaigns of the mid-1980s, the high-profile co-ordinator of the Mediawatch Sub-committee, Zaibun Siraj, was described as “Singapore’s most vocal feminist ... a fervent feminist. A spitfire, outspoken and unconventional” (*Sunday Times*, 1988:21).<sup>6</sup>

Any attempts to re-define ‘feminism’ are necessarily limited by its association with ‘Western values’. This powerful discourse represents an important context for public scrutiny of the private - family values, sexuality, morality, and even creative expression. It is a discourse which reverberates through all policy making. These two sets of values are considered to be mutually exclusive and necessarily dichotomous (Ang and Stratton, 1995:180). In picture-cut out style, Western/Asian values represent bad/good; decadent/pure; economically weak/economically powerful; disorder/order; crime/stability; sexual promiscuity/morality; individualism/communalism. The rhetoric of Western versus Asian values is constantly reinforced through a public campaign of comparison, in which the Singapore government is represented as the archetype of Asian traditions and values. But, as Ang and Stratton have argued, this public display of ‘Asianness’ is a contradiction in terms: ‘On the one hand its very existence as a modern administrative unit is a thoroughly Western occasion, originating in British colonialism; on the other hand the Republic of Singapore now tries to represent itself as resolutely non-Western by emphasising its Asianness’ (Ang and Stratton, 1995:181).

Women are intrinsically tied to the debate over Asian values through their role as mothers. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998:145) says, “Asian-ness is importantly located in the normal family, the core of which is patriarchal”. Such a family structure and form is located in antiquity, is Chinese, ageist, sexist, and retains a powerful morality (PuruShotam, 1998:135). But, mothers are not simply the imparters of Asian culture, they are (re)producers of the ‘Asian family’. More specifically, in a country with declining birth rates among the upper and middle-classes (predominantly Chinese), they are the mothers of the (Asian as Confucian) nation. This is clearly evidenced in the furore that developed in 1983 around the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s call for graduate mothers to have more children (see Lyons-Lee, 1998). Lee called attention to a trend in which graduate women were delaying or forgoing marriage and children for their careers. He feared that in a country whose only resource was its people, a decline in birthrates amongst the well-educated would result in a ‘thinning of the gene pool’, and thus national economic disaster (Chua, 1995, p.21). So concerned was the government with the declining birth rate, that a series of incentives (including reduced personal income tax and priority education schemes) were developed to encourage graduate women to marry and have more than two children. In addition, incentives were implemented to encourage less educated women to ‘stop at two’ (see Saw, 1990). The schemes deliberately targeted women with secondary school education and above, based on Lee’s eugenicist belief that well educated mothers would produce more intelligent children. Heng and Devan (1995) point out the underlying racial motivations of this policy when they argue that graduates tended to be Chinese, and that the Chinese birth-rate had been declining. Encouraging Chinese to have more children was thus vital to the maintenance of the ethnic balance.

Described as a western movement characterised by sex, single motherhood and the breakdown of the American (the archetypal ‘West’) social fabric, feminism is clearly seen as a threat to women’s culturally inscribed roles as mothers. Hence, its political usage in the debate over Asian family values. Feminists are dangerous because they could encourage women to remain single, become lesbians, or have children outside of marriage. This concern is evident in the government’s response to the continuing campaign by AWARE and other local women’s groups for women civil servants to be

given the same medical benefits as their male counterparts. Currently, only male civil servants may extend their medical benefits to their dependents. AWARE argues that if women are performing the same job as men, with the same qualifications, then they should receive the same remuneration, including employment benefits. The matter has been taken up by the press and has received widespread public support. The government's response so far is to deny women these benefits on the grounds that they undermine the role of men as 'heads of households', for if women could extend their medical benefits to their dependents, men would become superfluous and lose their sense of identity (!). The family, as a central social institution, would be weakened. Using this line of reasoning, women who are feminists are not only considered to be unfeminine and undesirable, but also irresponsible.

Based on this brief account of AWARE's organisational workings, it would be easy to conclude that the association is conservative in both its public presentation of self (preferring the more neutral 'women's rights' instead of 'feminist') and its political objectives (pursuing a reformist agenda). This conservatism can be explained through reference to notions of 'culture/tradition' as well as 'state authoritarianism'. According to this analysis, AWARE members are marked by (and constrained within) a politically repressive regime as well as traditional 'Asian' culture. Such a view serves to reinforce a set of false dichotomies between tradition/modernity and Western/Asian within western feminist thinking which sees 'us' as inherently more complex and progressive. It not only overlooks diversity within the category 'Asian feminism', but also ignores the numerous ways in which AWARE women themselves actively utilise state and public discourses to their own ends. In the next sections I interrogate these two tropes of Asian feminist identity – traditional submissiveness and state control – by examining the ways in which AWARE negotiates such images as part of its engagement in Singapore's emerging civil society.

## **Traditional Asian Women?**

While AWARE avoids representing its goals as 'feminist' in the public arena, within internal documents, however, the term 'feminist' is used frequently. For example, in

describing the philosophy behind the Helpline, the 1993 Annual Report (unpublished) makes the following points:

Our pro-woman stance reflects feminist ideology and values. These values include self-determination, economic independence, freedom to choose, social justice, fairness, equality and equal opportunity.... We are cognisant of the fine balance between respecting caller's choice and offering her an alternative option. Ultimately, she is the one who has to make up her own mind and our primary role is to 'stand by her' (AWARE, 1993:3).

In addition, the majority of members describe themselves as feminists. Data from my own research shows that more than 80% of the interview respondents and almost 70% of the survey respondents self-identified as feminist. Not all women, however, used the term publicly. Some provocatively embrace the label, while others use it as a personal reference point rather than a publicly identifiable badge. These women are worried about the negative impact it may have on both their public and private lives. Another group, generally older and more conservative, follow AWARE's organisational lead. Such women adopt a 'give or take' attitude with a continual focus on ends rather than means. These women are also more inclined to re-define feminism according to its Asian or Singaporean features. A small minority of women reject the label altogether, a view that sits rather uneasily beside the beliefs of many members as well as the public statements of the organisation itself. The meanings that were attached to the feminist label also varied widely.<sup>7</sup> While all of the women I spoke to shared a common concern for affirming women's choices and ensuring legal equality, they often disagreed over what equality might look like and the best way to achieve it.

Most women support a legal understanding of equality based on merit. AWARE recognises that women, because of their difference to men (their ability to bear and raise children), have needs which are not always met because of these responsibilities. This does not mean a simple relegation of all women to traditional wife/mother roles but necessitates changes to the social structure that allow for greater sharing of this burden within the household and by the state. In present day society, responsibility for the family falls largely on the shoulders of women. Women can thus never be truly equal until this burden is shared by men, women, the state and private companies. In

employment, equality means that working parents are provided with adequate childcare. In the state sector, equality means that single parents can receive government housing. In this model of equality, it is the state's role to ensure that advances in the public sphere (more working women) are not hindered by unequal conditions in the private sphere (work place practices that ignore workers' private responsibilities).

While all the women argued that the law should recognise the intrinsic equality of intelligence and talents between men and women, at the same time approximately half of the women surveyed supported traditional views of women's roles within the family. These differences were clearly drawn out in a membership survey conducted in 1995. Members were asked a range of questions about their views on traditional sex roles. The respondents were roughly divided in half, between those who supported a traditional understanding of sex roles, and those who did not. Student members tended to be much more conservative, with 57% of students supporting both male and female traditional sex roles. In contrast, Life members showed higher levels of disagreement on questions related to women's duties and responsibilities, with 75% disagreeing with the view that a woman's primary duty was to care for her family. These results indicate that women who have been more deeply involved in organisational activities, either through a lengthy membership (Life members) or frequent attendance (indicating involvement in committee work) are more likely to reject traditional sex roles. Within AWARE, therefore, definitions of both equality and feminism come to mean something very complex. Non-self-identified feminists are not necessarily 'traditional' nor feminists 'modern'.

What is more significant, however, is not so much the diversity of views, but the ways in which such differences become reconciled within the organisational structure as symbolic of 'women's choices'. As a 'women's rights organisation', AWARE's role is to affirm women's standpoints and offer opportunities for change through the slow process of education. It is a decision that AWARE has dealt with at an organisational level through an insistence on ambivalence; a strategy of partial silence in which AWARE attempts to become all things to all people. The Executive uses ambivalence as a means of negotiating the beliefs and sentiments of individual

members - in particular, the views of those who openly identify as feminist, and those who may adopt an anti-feminist stance. This means providing room for all women to pursue their own visions of feminism (or women's rights). Consequently, some women become involved in Helpline or counselling services, others focus on research and education, and others concentrate on advocacy and policy change. In addition, there has been little attempt to delineate or define 'Singaporean feminism' or 'AWARE feminism' except in the broadest sense - what AWARE does. There are few opportunities for the wider membership to engage in discussions of different forms or types of feminism. The threat in talking about feminism in an overt manner is that it could alienate women who are wary of the term, as well as send potentially dangerous messages to the government about AWARE's interests and agenda.

In recent years this ambivalent stance towards the label 'feminist' has been challenged by some members and this has led to conflict and struggle within the organisation. Some women called for an organisation-wide conscientisation program designed to examine gender issues and explore different feminist beliefs (see Lyons, in press). They believed that such a program was necessary to achieve both organisational continuity and clarity of objectives. This call was rejected on the grounds that it contradicted AWARE's status as a 'women's rights' (and not feminist) organisation. These women argued that AWARE should not promote feminism as the only choice available to its members. They prefer to adopt a 'don't ask, don't tell' stance in which the labels feminism/feminist are eschewed in favour of 'women's rights', 'woman centredness', and 'pro-woman'. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998:150-1) argues, however, such an approach is inherently conservative because it fails to challenge underlying assumptions about either Asia or the West, and thus supports the state's own version of the threat posed by 'westernisation'. Such a strategy also inevitably produces internal conflict when women hold competing views on the pace and direction of social change.

## **Authoritarian State Control?**

In light of the highly emotive language used to describe feminists, as well as the strong association of feminism with an encroaching western value system, it is not surprising that AWARE has chosen not to identify as feminist in the public sphere. Being associated with negative images could reflect on AWARE's public statements and policy papers such that they may be dismissed, not on the quality of their argument, but on the negative perceptions of the public. In the same way, the provision of direct community services may be jeopardised. The decision not to identify as feminist is one which is based on both strategic conservatism and political astuteness. Fear of negative perceptions or closure means that the organisation tempers its public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism. In many ways, this is a successful means of state control - AWARE ends up policing its own behaviour.

Many women use the language of strategy and warfare to describe AWARE's deliberate decision not to raise certain issues. In embarking on an experiment to promote 'civil society', both the state and non-government organisations (NGOs) such as AWARE are engaged in a constant process of 'testing the boundaries' between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For this reason, AWARE is never completely sure how its statements will be received and is forced to respond cautiously:

It's a fine balance. You want to say something but you kind of have to know where the markers are. In anything you need to know where the markers are, except in anything you don't really know where they are. So you err on the side of caution. You are always very careful [May Wong].<sup>8</sup>

This is based on a recognition of two factors - first that public antagonism is unhelpful in trying to bring about change, and second, a strong fear of government displeasure leading to the possibility that the association could be closed down. Fear of being 'closed down' or de-registered is constant within the organisation, particularly amongst older members. Bracketing or putting aside some issues is a tactic that enables AWARE to continue its activism in other areas. Many younger members are sceptical of the government's desire to close AWARE down. Some argue that

AWARE is too vocal and too visible for de-registration to occur without any fuss. Other members, however, point to the 'Marxist conspiracy' and its ramifications.<sup>9</sup> These fears are not totally unfounded. At the 1993 Woman of the Year award ceremony Acting Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi warned that some younger women preferred a more aggressive approach to social change. His advice was to "continue to be moderate and avoid being confrontational" (quoted in Nirmala, 1995:6).

From this account of AWARE's activities it is easy to conclude that the state occupies a primarily determining role in the nature and extent of feminism in Singapore. Geraldine Heng (1997:32) expresses such a view when she argues that one of the defining features of third world feminism is the "presence, intervention, and the role of the state". Using the example of AWARE, she believes that the following subjects are always 'off-limits':

all issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference; the identification of structural and systemic, rather than contingent, inequities in society; the analysis of state apparatuses of power in the lives of Singaporean women; and, indeed, government policies and positions on controversial issues of national importance (Heng, 1997:43).

While I recognise the significant role of the state in delineating AWARE's sphere of intervention, I do not believe that this represents a total 'disengagement' from a recognition of difference, as Heng suggests. The danger in this view is that in focusing on the state Heng tends to project an image of Singaporean women reacting to authoritarian control, and to ignore the complexity of attitudes towards both feminism and difference within AWARE. Such a reading also ignores the presence of organisational conflict and tension. It is precisely this satisfying reading of AWARE's public negotiation of face that renders diversity invisible. My point here is that this account of strategic conservatism and political astuteness provides little room for thinking about the range of individual feminist practices. In other words, it tells us little about decision-making and choice by individuals as well as the collective. Instead, AWARE, as a unified group is seen to be acted upon by external forces and (re)acts in a recognisably rational mode. AWARE's actions are not simply reformist



because of state power, but also because AWARE is compelled to respect the choices that other women make in their lives. I believe that such 'political' constraints serve to reinforce an ethical commitment to validating each woman's lived experience. AWARE's role then is one of education and information dissemination – providing women with new ways of looking at old issues. At the same time, however, the extent to which such functions can address 'race', class or sexuality, depends on whether the state deems such interventions 'appropriate'.

States (particularly authoritarian ones) can play an over-determinist role in the activities of third world feminist organisations. I am not contesting the significant constraints that are placed on AWARE's activities by present-day political culture (see Rodan, 1995; Heng, 1997). AWARE's decision-making does not take place within a vacuum, and the ability of the state to set limits on acceptable civil engagement is formidable. But, such constraints should not be seen merely as forms of either coercion or cooption. The Singapore government's management of feminist civil engagement is successful because its discourse of social transformation is ultimately supported by a large segment of AWARE's membership. Even those AWARE members who question the government's vision recognise that their constituents may not necessarily share their view. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998:144) has clearly pointed out, there is a remarkable alliance between the middle-class values espoused by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and AWARE which centres around a 'shared language' of "fears of falling and the normal family ideology". This produces a situation in which the predominant voice of 'moderate feminism' in AWARE "arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices" (PuruShotam, 1998:145).

## **Disrupting the Centre**

In negotiating the meaning of feminism for their own lives the women of AWARE face a constant battle with dominant public perceptions of feminism built around the political discourse of Asian values, in which feminism has been firmly associated with

the 'West'. Women occupy a pivotal role in state management of ethnicity and morality in which the rhetoric of Western versus Asian values shapes attempts to redefine women's roles in a newly developed nation. Singaporean feminists walk a constant tight rope between their knowledge of public/media perceptions, political usage of the label 'Western values', and their own beliefs. One can never simply 'be' a feminist - it is an identity built on contingency and compromise. Given the current political context the decision to be, or not to be, a feminist is by necessity a tentative one. Ambivalence becomes the defining framework within which these decisions are made. For AWARE as an organisation, adopting a strategy of ambivalence allows for the diversity of expression among members at the same time that it avoids placing prescribed limits on its own actions.

This unwillingness to associate AWARE with feminism is inevitably contradictory for several reasons. While AWARE members may avoid using the term in their public statements, there is a strong association of AWARE with feminism in the public consciousness, as well as among individual members themselves. A further contradiction is that ambivalence acts as an important mechanism in AWARE's own internal self-regulation. The Singapore government is most adept in utilising group and individual self-regulation as a means of control because it is so efficient. Fear of negative perceptions or closure means that the organisation tempers its public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism.

Finally, and in spite of these contradictions, I want to argue that the process of 'being' a feminist in Singapore should not be seen as simply as an outcome of political control. Individual decision making is a reflection of class, marital status, age, as well cultural values and belief systems. It is a process that takes place within and is certainly influenced by dominant discourses about Asian values, civic responsibility, multiculturalism, equality, and social change. At an organisational level, these discourses need to be read against AWARE's goals, objectives, and activist programmes. Within these discourses, becoming a 'feminist', while socially and politically fraught, is never simply prescribed. It is against this re-reading of agency and 'choice' that we need to re-examine dominant constructions of 'Asian feminism' and to interrogate the taxonomy which serves to identify such groupings. While

Anglo-Australian feminist accounts of 'different feminisms' allow for a diversity of experience, they rarely provide room for such complexity. The challenge is to turn the centre's gaze in upon itself; to make the statement 'Many women in Australia openly embrace the label feminist' equally problematic.

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<sup>22</sup> I am not suggesting that they are the only exceptional group – similar common-sense assertions have also been made about other women, including migrants and indigenous women.

<sup>3</sup> Using a purposive sampling strategy I interviewed 33 women according to four key indices – ethnicity, length of membership, age, and membership category. My intention was not to establish an interview sample that was representative of the entire organisation but to interview as diverse a group as possible. In the interview I asked the respondents to talk about how they came to join AWARE and their reasons for joining. I wanted to know how they saw themselves in relation to the category/label ‘feminist’, whether they embraced or rejected the term in describing themselves and AWARE, and how they would define the term.

<sup>4</sup> There are three membership categories - Ordinary, Student, and Life Members.

<sup>5</sup> This collection of terms and phrases has been extracted from the interview transcripts.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Lyons, in press.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these differences see Lyons, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Name chosen is a pseudonym chosen to reflect ethnicity and language.



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<sup>9</sup> In May 1987, 22 people (including several AWARE members) were arrested under the Internal Security Act for threatening the state and national interests (see Rodan, 1993:92). They were detained without trial. Some later ‘confessed’ and were rehabilitated with an agreement not to enter into ‘politics’. AWARE was silent on the arrests, and many members still believe that they narrowly escaped arrest and the closure of the organisation.