



## Reflections on “thinking postfeminism transnationally”

Simidele Dosekun

To cite this article: Simidele Dosekun (2021): Reflections on “thinking postfeminism transnationally”, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2021.1996426](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996426)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996426>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 07 Nov 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 96



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Reflections on “thinking postfeminism transnationally”

Simidele Dosekun

Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

This brief piece looks back to and forward from the 2015 article published in this journal, “For Western Girls Only? Postfeminism as Transnational Culture.” I reflect on how the concept of postfeminism as “transnational culture” has been taken up by other feminist media and cultural scholars, and also where, that is to say, questioning where the “transnational” is considered to be.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 September 2021  
Accepted 13 October 2021

### KEYWORDS

Postfeminism; transnational; culture; feminisms; intersectionality

In my 2015 article “For Western Girls Only? Postfeminism as Transnational Culture” published in this journal, and in the larger project of which the article is a foundational part (Simidele Dosekun 2020), I argue that the popular cultural sensibility that many feminist media and cultural scholars had come to call “postfeminism” is not “for” women in the global North alone, as was the predominant assumption in the literature at the time, including by omission. My argument, in a nutshell, was that neoliberal globalisation puts postfeminism into transnational motion and circulation, although, seeking to avoid any simple, universalising suggestion that what this means is that women the world over are now all postfeminist, whoever and wherever they may be, I went on to suggest that there are material and other practical logics and constraints to just who can “do” the culture and claim to embody its “happy” subject positions. There were a number of scholars already working on postfeminism beyond the Western world when I wrote the article, such as Michelle M. Lazar (2006), already seeing the cultural formation on the ground in their different research contexts, as I was too, in Nigeria. However, it seemed to me that the how and why of this needed theorising, and that the intellectual politics of applying the concept of postfeminism, even the sheer term, to such places called for reflection, when, in its very constitution as a feminist concept and term, “postfeminism” so clearly and unabashedly declares its Western feminist historicity and self-referentiality, its “not for some of us,” as I later characterised it. The primary aim of the article, then, was to “clear a politically framed theoretical space” (Radha S. Hegde 1998, 272) for “thinking postfeminism” outside the global North, for those of us considering that there might be some cause to, and analytic value in doing so. In the converse direction, the article was also a critique of the predominant Anglo-American literature on postfeminism at the time for what I deemed its failure to grapple more than superficially with both racial and geopolitical “difference,” including its complete lack of engagement with the subfield of

**CONTACT** Simidele Dosekun  [s.o.dosekun@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.o.dosekun@lse.ac.uk)  Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

transnational feminist cultural studies, with the urgent, clearly relevant and brilliantly insightful work of scholars like Inderpal Grewal, Radha Hegde, Raka Shome and Mimi Thi Nguyen, among many others.

In the years since the article was published, a steady stream of research has continued to emerge on postfeminism in the global South and East, responding to “the call for a transnational understanding of [the culture] in both theoretical and empirical terms” (Sara Liao 2019, 666): in Africa (e.g. see the special issue of *Feminist Theory* edited by Pamila Gupta and Ronit Frenkel 2019), in South Asia (e.g. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora 2020), in East Asia (e.g. Liao 2019; Fan Yang 2020), for example. And of course, from such work, further critical understandings of the culture, and of its variously globalised and local sources and sense, boundaries and contestations, and subjects and styles, have continued to emerge. For instance, whereas I argue in my work that material privilege is a major enabling condition of global Southern women’s potential self-fashioning and self-conception as “cosmopolitan” postfeminist types—which is not to say a *determining* factor, as the suggestion appears to be sometimes read—through a textual analysis of a South African bridal television show, Alexia Smit (2016) adds the understanding that such practices and imaginaries of self may be about class (and other) aspirations too, a sign from subject not of where they are just yet but where they intend and hope to be. Smit’s (2016) contribution thus also concerns the polytemporality of what we might call “postfeminist times.” Researching immigrant South Asian beauty workers in the United Kingdom, that is to say, women who service others with postfeminist aesthetic labour, Nandita Dutta (2021) points out that the women also perform this labour upon themselves, and argues that in this and other respects they, too, are hailed by and turning desirously towards postfeminism.<sup>1</sup> Her contribution is a particularly important one, raising new avenues and questions for future research for, among others, bringing precariously positioned global Southern women into markedly different kind of view in the literature, and drawing attention to the racialised and classed transnational economies and intimacies of labour and care through which the culture is fashioned.

Dutta’s (2021) work is a rare example of broaching postfeminism as transnational culture *within* the West. More common, in my reading of the literature to do with this part of the world, is to see the concept acknowledged and used descriptively, but hardly analytically. In other words, there does not seem to be much thinking about the West itself as necessarily and inherently a transnational space too, and not only, as in Dutta’s case (2021), in terms of the fact that people migrate there from elsewhere. A critical literature review by Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, Sinikka Elliott, Carla Rice and Jeanne Marecek (2017) of how Rosalind Gill’s foundational conceptualisation of postfeminism as a “sensibility” has been taken up and developed by others is suggestive of the omission, and mode of thinking, to which I am referring here. Riley et al. categorise developments in the literature on postfeminism into four themes, one of which is “transnational postfeminism,” under which rubric the stated focus is the growing literature on “the transnational movement of postfeminism” (2017, 8). The work they review: on postfeminism in Russia, Singapore China, Ukraine and Nigeria—the latter being my 2015 article, which, rather curiously to me, is reduced to empirical example when in fact it comprises a conceptual and methodological proposition. The transnational, it seems, is only “elsewhere.” A centre is thus reasserted and “re-unmarked,” including in Riley et al.’s very caution that work on transnational postfeminism should not be about “simply providing

evidence of different nations' *variations*" of postfeminism vis-à-vis "their Western counterparts" (2017, 8, my emphasis). But which postfeminism where is not a variation, I wonder? Surely postfeminism in America, say—or let me say *white* America to really emphasise the point—is not simply identical to or interchangeable with postfeminism elsewhere in the white world but rather, and again necessarily, locally inflected and intersected too? This also demands recognition and critical consideration, surely.

With "feminism" having become newly visible, speakable, even "popular" in the last few years, the attention of feminist media and cultural scholars is beginning to turn away from postfeminism. I am with Rosalind Gill (2016) who argues that we should not be too quick to conclude that we are now simply "post-postfeminist." Apart from the fact that there are clear continuities between postfeminism and what Catherine Rottenberg (2014) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) have conceptualised, respectively, as "neoliberal feminism" and "popular feminism," we must not forget once again that "feminist times" are never singular, and that there is a politics in the question of which—or whose—times it is that we tell of, or that we might presume to make *the* story (Victoria Browne 2014; Clare Hemmings 2011). As the literature on neoliberal and popular feminisms continues to emerge and grow, *per force* in dialogue with that on postfeminism before it, it is my hope that the conceptual and empirical insights, and methodological and analytic impulses, that intersectional and transnational approaches have contributed and continue to contribute to our understandings of postfeminism in the context of neoliberal globalisation will carry over—be read, be acknowledged, be engaged with rigorously and built upon—likewise the wider bodies and traditions of feminist knowledge upon which these contributions stand.

## Note

1. Here, as across the literature on postfeminism in both South and North, I would argue that postfeminist subjectification is under-theorised, as a distinction should be made between being interpellated by and buying into postfeminism, and therefore "being" or "becoming" a postfeminist subject. I argue that the former does not simply or ineluctably amount to the latter. See Dosekun (2020) for a fuller discussion.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Simidele Dosekun* is an assistant professor in media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research centres black African women to explore questions of gender, race, subjectivity and power in a global context. E-mail: s.o.dosekun@lse.ac.uk

## References

- Anwer, Megha, and Anupama Arora. 2020. "#ImNotAChickFlick: Neoliberalism and Postfeminism in Veere Di Wedding (My Friend's Wedding, 2018)." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 11 (2): 146–168.

- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Browne, Victoria. 2014. *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
- Dosekun, Simidele. 2020. *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Dutta, Nandita. 2021. "I like It Clean': Brazilian Waxing and Postfeminist Subjectivity among South Asian Beauticians in London." *Frontiers in Sociology* 6: 646344. Accessed 6 September 2021. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.646344/full>
- Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 610–630. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293.
- Gupta, Pamila, and Ronit Frenkel. 2019. "Chick-Lit in a Time of African Cosmopolitanism." *Feminist Theory* 20 (2): 123–132. doi:10.1177/1464700119826185.
- Hegde, S. Radha. 1998. "A View from Elsewhere: Locating Difference and the Politics of Representation from A Transnational Feminist Perspective." *Communication Theory* 8 (3): 271–297. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.1998.tb00222.x.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2011. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lazar, M. Michelle. 2006. "Discover the Power of Femininity!" *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (4): 505–517. doi:10.1080/14680770600990002.
- Liao, Sara. 2019. "Wang Hong Fashion Culture and the Postfeminist Time in China." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 25 (5): 663–685. doi:10.1080/1362704X.2019.1638158.
- Riley, Sarah, Adrienne Evans, Sinikka Elliott, Carla Rice, and Jeanne Marecek. 2017. "A Critical Review of Postfeminist Sensibility." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 11 (12): e12367. Accessed 6 September 2021. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spc3.12367>
- Rottenberg, Catherine. 2014. "The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism." *Cultural Studies* 28 (3): 418–437. doi:10.1080/09502386.2013.857361.
- Smit, Alexia. 2016. "Reading South African Bridal Television: Consumption, Fantasy and Judgement." *Communicatio* 42 (4): 63–78. doi:10.1080/02500167.2016.1252781.
- Yang, Fan. 2020. "Post-feminism and Chick Flicks in China: Subjects, Discursive Origin and New Gender Norms." *Feminist Media Studies*. Accessed 6 September 2021. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2020.1791928>