

READING THEORY, DOING POLITICS: CHALLENGES OF FEMINIST THEORY AND FEMINIST POLITICS

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Abstract: The challenges that feminism faces are varied and many and come from different spaces and positions, depending on where people are located. Questions around pedagogy, methodology, subject matter, analytical categories, questions of representation, body, location, ableism and validity confront feminist theoreticians all the time. The questions about the disengagement between what is 'taught' and what is 'practiced' and also who benefits from such discourses is an evidence of the presence of gaps between the academia and the ground reality. Women from different social positions and locations have voiced their concerns about the dangers of practicing a single kind of feminism which glosses over the differences and thus foregrounds particular and specific experiences. This paper aims to foreground some of these issues and discusses how to integrate various sections of women and their aspirations and form bonds of solidarity that, both theoretician and political activists should work towards. To move beyond certain ideological frameworks where differences are rejected and subjugated is a challenge that feminism should face up to. There is a need to stress the importance of building alliances and asking new questions that global capitalism has raised. It has never been more imperative to revisit practices of pedagogy, ways of framing issues concerning women which cuts across women in multiple locations and spaces.

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Introduction: The resistance movement that started in the 1960s resulted in decades of struggle, subversion, consciousness raising, demanding of full political citizenship, education for women, political power and an end to legally recognized rights of men to control women, economically and socially. Since then feminism has been gaining momentum and has been experienced by women across continents, however in varied forms depending on the pressing social and political concerns driving women to mobilize themselves and others who see the urgency of such causes. The nature of the feminist movement over a period of time has changed and has been formulated and reformulated in terms of the political and social progress. However, with the growth and expansion of feminism, specific problems with the practice and theory of feminism have come to the fore. "There seems to be an ever increasing wave against patriarchy and sexism accompanied by expectations of women's solidarity and emancipation. But this rebellion, these expectations have not yet clear understanding of the relationship between women's exploitation and oppression on the one hand and the overall class exploitation and oppression of the workers on the other hand"(Maria, 1979) Feminism has made entry into institutions by way of Women's studies at the universities. The number of students who join such courses has seen a decent growth over a period of time across continents. Be it America, Europe or South Asia, women have been participating in feminist movements and women's studies as a subject to be studied has become popular. Feminism is no more about just the undefined West but women's

participation in political and social events has increased across the globe and women's resistance has been documented over this period. The challenge to the view that feminism is only western came from countries where women played significant roles in various kinds of struggles. "After the mid-1980s, documentation of women's resistance movements in non-Western societies further deepened understandings of women's liberation globally. Historical reconstructions of women's movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Asia (India, Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Japan) and elsewhere (Egypt, Turkey, and Iran) established that women had played significant roles in the national liberation and revolutionary movements of their countries. Feminist struggles had progressed along varied, sometimes interrelated trajectories, all of which contributed to the growth of feminist consciousness" (Christine, 2001).

Feminism certainly has been growing ever since with many more women joining such movements and also with the institutionalizing of women's studies the wave has spread. With the institutionalization of feminist studies and courses being offered along a variety of subjects feminism in itself has become a focus of various debates around the credibility and validity of such ideology in the current context. Many people believe that we have reached a time where we are past feminism and have entered a post feminist period. "Considering feminism to be a thing of the past, many young people believe that our society is now post-feminist. Many give credit to activists in generations before them whose hard work allows young women opportunities to live feminist lives.

Some are aware that the successful activism that produced many emancipated changes for women has also expanded opportunities for men. Yet, youth who have not directly felt the impact of sexism feel that the gender war is over and there is no need to revisit how social structures and public policies can produce and/or maintain an inequitable world for women. Today's youth have been told that they can accomplish anything. Many believe that any deficit they experience in realizing their goals is due to personal weakness, and not anything to do with attempts to negotiate an unequal playing field rooted in gender politics. It may be upsetting for college students to hear that outside forces can determine their future options and alter how others perceive their potential for learning, working or leading based upon stereotypes surrounding gender, race and class" (Dianne, 2009)

On the other hand there is a section that believes that feminism is not relevant to a large section of women and is limited to elite women who are associated with academics or have access to powerful institutions. With everything around, feminism and the discontent around it has increased although even when it remains very important to continue struggles around the issues that it takes up. The challenges to feminism in the present times are many, be it the feminist politics or theoreticians there are various issues which need to be taken cognizance of in order to maintain the relevance of feminism in our times and in our lives. With the disgruntlement around feminism increasing, and the politics around power dynamics it is imperative to engage people in discourses about feminism. Even in academic institutions the resistance to feminism has become prominent and well documented. As documented by Dianne Philip various students expressed concerns around studying feminism alleging that they were taught according to the instructor's personal agendas. The theories that the instructor taught them were an attempt on her/his attempt to indoctrinate students and the materials related to the course were based upon the instructors opinions and not any historical fact or reviewed research. So the questions of feminist pedagogy become very important in today's time to make students know the relevance of the struggles of feminism. University professors often feel it a challenge to use feminist pedagogy in the class. What is important here to realize is how they should be made to realize the importance of engaging with such issues. "Not only should students be able to analyse information provided to them about the roles of gender, race and class in determining the positionality of individuals and groups, but to engage in actions to help end oppression. As a form of emancipator or liberatory education, this type of pedagogy can help students make sense of their

students and transform them into critical thinkers who can decide their own positions on issues, professors can serve as agents of change"(Dianne, 2009) Breeze William touches upon the other question of feminist pedagogy and discusses his experiences as a male instructor who was teaching feminism and how he was challenged by students who questioned his authority and ability in being able to personally relate to feminism. The author offers insights into how feminism and theories around feminism would not suffice if male scholars remain absent from the field, since the field seeks diversity and claims to end oppression of marginalized groups, it is imperative upon feminists to think about the position of the people who speak for feminism

With the corporatization of the university it has in a sense challenged the class room in terms of students not willing to opt for subjects where they need to think critically but rather they opt for subjects where the prospectus of getting a job are higher, where the markets offers them quick jobs. The political economic conditions of neo-liberalism have had a huge impact on feminism and how it has been looked upon either as a subject to study or as a movement to be part of. Anna Feigenbaum explains that the resistance by the students in the classroom is not an indication of their inability to learn but signifies opportunities to engage students and to use the space created for transformation"(Feigenbaum,2007). How can the women's studies faculty upon whom it is imperative to engage students and motivate them to understand the basis of knowledge practices and help them to conceptualize new ways to critique the already existing patterns of understanding. How does feminism in practice in a class room, with students from varied backgrounds, classes and castes help them interrogate the various naturalized (normal) ideas about gender, sexuality, and the relationship that women have with their society. It is a continuous and a rigorous task and an exercise towards creating spaces for challenging and reframing the existing theoretical perspectives and frameworks.

One of the biggest questions that often feminist theoreticians have to encounter is the validity and the need for having feminist theory to understand society and culture. What is often argued is that there is no need for having a separate discipline or a theory, since all the traditional subjects/theoreticians do this very well. What feminist theoreticians in these times of constant backlash toward their methods have to do is creatively think about new methods and categories that have been used for analysis. Gender/woman/sex as a category for analysis has been beaten around by feminist through their scholarship as well but what is also significant is that along with this critique there is a need to delve into the impact of sexuality, race,

class, age, ability, nationality, religion, and so on. With universities the feminism that is practiced has often been deemed as 'elite feminism' which stays within the four walls of the university. Does it really impact the women who are oppressed and who feminism propounds it stands for. Audre Lorde's work on the subject says that "whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistake. I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children's culture in school. Black and third world people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions" (Lorde, 1984). The challenge that comes from the categories that are located outside feminism, as well subjects within feminism has to be seriously thought of and certain ways of integrating and making feminism all inclusive has to be worked towards. The discontent towards the methodology of feminism cannot be easily dismissed and needs rigorous thinking and attention. In one of the very interesting and significant essays, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, the author raises precisely these questions and later tries to give answers and suggest a methodology of forming solidarity beyond borders to make feminism relevant in our lives. In her work Mohanty analyses the production of the Third World Woman as a singular monolith subject in western feminist scholarship. She acknowledges that although western feminism is not homogenous but certain patterns of making assumptions are implicit to such scholarship. She discusses the similarities in various analytical categories used by western feminist when dealing with non western women. She stresses the need of realizing the political implications of certain analytical strategies on part of the feminists and not get stuck in analytical presuppositions. There is a body of criticism that calls feminism inadequate and obscuring of how some women oppress other women in the name of being 'sisters in struggle' and fail to acknowledge the privileges they hold and the gaps they create in feminism.

The other challenge to feminism comes from establishing solidarity with marginalized groups. One such group is women of colour who often criticize white mainstream feminism for ignoring their specific struggles and the inadequacy of feminism to represent them. Black and non western women critique feminism for the way feminist thought has deconstructed the classic liberal human subject as white, European and male, and in doing so how feminism has merely replaced the universal male with

a construction of their own universal woman that is equally inaccurate and unrepresentative of the majority of women. The Universal woman deserves as much criticism as does the universal man. "This Universal woman at the center of feminist thought is really a white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual woman. She masquerades as representative of all women when she is really the embodiment of elite or privileged white woman" (Fatima, 2008). This way of formulating 'women' has been criticized for being racist and renders mainstream feminism exclusive, placing elite white women at the centre of such feminist discourses, pushing non white women at the margins of such feminist theory and practice. Due to the white woman as a referent for such theory it renders such theory as inadequate and not able to recognize the issues which are not associated with their 'feminist' issues. The feminism practiced in this manner remains focused on the issues and experiences of white upper class women. "Feminism is seen to correlate only with gender unmodified by any other social force or axis of power. The essence of womanhood is erroneously viewed as her gender which is constructed according to the experiences of elite white women. Lesbians of colour, for example, must "shed" their race and sexual orientation in order for us to get to the "woman" part of them" (Lorde, 1984). Audre Lorde in her *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* brings forth the perspective on how differences between women (which again in itself is a debatable category) are very much present and palpable but what is significant is not to remain stuck in differences but to recognize the differences and create a pattern of working together even with various differences. She states that "Institutional rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people...Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectations. We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences and as a result those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion" (Lorde, 1984). Audre advocates a case of recognizing the differences not just between men and women but between women themselves. As a black lesbian feminist she states the need for feminism to rethink the categories of domination and subordination within their own movements. She states that need to move beyond the superficial aspects of social change and eradicate the roots of internalized patterns of oppression that

feminist groups have created within their own groups.

Feminist agenda has also faced criticism from differently-abled women for not considering their agendas as part of the feminist movement. Neither has there been any political feminist movement or serious feminist theory to located disabled women in the feminist discourse. The feminist debates so far have not engaged with disabled women and made a concerted effort to incorporate their demands and wishes in the feminist movement for rights. Feminists should take cognizance of the fact that rights of disabled women and their issues are at the very core of the feminist movement. Nasa Begum in her essay *Disabled Women and The Feminist Agenda* argues that how being a black woman who experiences the triple oppression of being black, female and disabled, disability has not attracted attention on part of the feminists and neither have the issues central to their oppression been taken up by feminist movement and their agenda. The ascription of roles that renders differently abled women as powerless should be critiqued and analysed by feminist so that such women also feel part of the movement. Nasa Begum argues that “the experiences of disabled women must be seen as an integral part of the social, economic and political structures which serve to control our daily lives” (Nasa, 1992). Acknowledging the differences between the disabled women in terms of class, age, race and sexuality, Nasa Begum argues that avoiding an analysis of experiences of disabled women results in the danger of “feeding into cultural misunderstanding and stereotypes surrounding such women. It is essential that feminist politicians as well as theoreticians use the experiences of such women to develop a political analysis which creates bonds and forges positive strengths”.(Nasa, 1992) Nasa insists the need to move away from the individual perspective of disability which interprets disability as an individual deviation and where the difference is regarded as a personal tragedy. However Nasa insists that there is a need for an alternative perspective which treats disability not just an individual handicap but as a form of social oppression. “Disability is a form of social oppression which is articulated through prevailing ideological, social and political determinants and as a consequence of these disabled people are socially excluded and handicapism is constructed. It is essential to recognize that gender influences play an important role in determining how that person’s disability is reacted to and perceived Rehabilitation programmes place so much emphasis on cultivating competitive attitudes and addressing concerns about male sexuality, that while enabling men to aspire to dominant notions of masculinity, the needs of disabled women are ignored or left on

the periphery”(Nasa, 1992) Feminism has to break the silence regarding issues of disabled women and see how can they incorporate their anxieties, issues and concerns within the ambit of their struggle and resistance for rights and just social and political world. Feminist movement needs to acknowledge the experiences of disabled women and recognize their aspirations as a critical component of the feminist movement.

One of the important things that feminists have to consider is that they have to critique imperialistic tendencies of their governments in order to convey their relevance. As Johanna Breener states that one of the good examples of women’s rights for imperialist purposes is George’s Bush’s claim that the US war on Afghanistan was carried out to promote human rights for Afghan women. The ground for this claim was laid in part by the international women’s rights campaign begun in 1977 by a coalition of Northern women’s rights organizations. The campaign called on the international community to deny investment and recognition to the Taliban, completely ignored the complicity of the North in the installation of the Taliban in the first place, and the ways in which Washington’s tolerance of Taliban rule was bound up in its overall neoliberal geo-political agenda. (Brenner, 2000) Reading a blog entry about Hillary Clinton’s visit to Congo I came across the concerns expressed by the blogger related to how women who have power in fact misuse their power to further subjugate the already subjugated people. The blogger wrote “Hillary Clinton defends her rude behavior on the one hand by suggesting that she’s standing up for women’s (rather than human) rights in the Congo, and then promptly flies over to support a female warlord with the blood of thousands – many of whom were undoubtedly women – on her hands. The hypocrisy is brutal. What this clearly demonstrates is that feminism isn’t about human rights at all, but rather power — especially for “big women” like Hillary Clinton and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. If the new American foreign policy mission is promoting feminism, i.e. female dominance, let’s get that out in the open and argue its virtues here at home. Despite the fact that there are some serious moral issues with exporting any political ideology, we should at least figure out whether we approve of what our politicians would force on others.” (<http://www.welmer.org/2009/08/13/feminist-imperialism/>)As Mohanty discusses in her article *Towards an Anti Imperialist Politics: Reflections of a Desi Feminist* it is important for feminist movement to have an anti-imperialist frame and make the project of empire visible in the ‘gendered and sexualized state practices’ of the empire. Feminists have to incorporate in their agenda a seriousness to oppose the government and the war that it has waged

in the name of women's liberation. "In my opinion, this means making the strongest possible case for taking a stand against the US government and the current regime's war-state. Both US foreign policy and domestic policy at this time are corporate and military driven. Both have led to the militarisation of daily life around the world and in the US – specifically for immigrants, refugees, and people of colour. This is not merely a critique of the war-state as is, but rather a closer examination of what this means in terms of daily, lived realities for the citizens of the US. In such a reading, militarisation inevitably means mobilising practices of masculinisation and heterosexualisation. Both can be understood through a critique of the racialised and gendered logic of a civilisational narrative marshalled to create and re-create insiders and outsiders in the project of empire building. Thus, for instance, as Miriam Cook argues in a different context, 'saving' brown women in Afghanistan justifies US imperial aggression (the rescue mission of civilising powers), just as the increased militarisation of domestic law enforcement, the border patrol, and the INS can be justified in the name of the War on Drugs, and its successor, the War on Terrorism" (Cook, 2004) Thus for feminism an important site for critique has to be the corporate global economics impacting power relations of gender and sexuality and also the neo-liberal agendas of the state for furthering their imperial project. Mapping an anti-imperialist framework is thus an impending concern for feminist so that the empire does not lay siege on other less powerless nations in the name of liberating and emancipating women. If feminism doesn't critique and challenge the structuring of policies that has a direct impact on infinite number of women outside the empire then feminism doesn't stand for social justice but appears to be only about power and desire to be at the centre of that axis of power domination. Again going to Mohanty who suggests that in order for feminism to reach beyond borders feminist need to think about their pedagogical ways and strategies and making their pedagogical ways a site for engagement with such questions of nation, imperialism, democracy, solidarity, inclusion, exclusion and also about

making the links about 'war at home and war abroad'. Arundhati Roy in her one of her talks about empire and its mechanisms to repress said that "Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it...to deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness –and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe" (Roy, 2000)

In conclusion the challenges that feminism faces are varied and many and come from different spaces, positions, depending on where people are located. Questions around pedagogy, methodology, subject matter, analytical categories, questions of representation, body, location, ableism and validity confront feminist theoreticians and politicians all the time. These questions need to be seriously thought of. How to integrate various sections of women and their aspirations and form bonds of solidarity is a path that feminism, both theoretician and political activists should work towards. To move beyond certain ideological frameworks where differences are rejected and subjugated is a challenge that feminism should face up to. There is a need to stress the importance of building alliances and asking new questions that global capitalism has raised. It has never been more imperative to revisit practices of pedagogy, ways of framing issues concerning women which cuts across women in multiple locations and spaces. "A transnational feminist practice depends on building solidarities across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief and so on. Making gender and feminist agendas explicit in anti-globalization movements and to articulate feminism within that framework is to begin challenging unstated masculinism" (Mohanty, 2002). Thus there is the need to know how does one establish a transnational solidarity without assimilating others into a common unity but by renouncing the utopian, libertarian vision and the importance of recognizing the limits of feminism and moving beyond certain traditions and explanations which are considered central to a particular kind of feminist discourse.

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