

Women in Knowledge Production; through the Feminist Anthropologists Lens

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Abstract: *The categorisations as male/female and their gendered role expectations are socially constructed. Since many years, feminist anthropologists have laid much emphasis on this power difference as well as understanding how the varied prevailing practices/norms/patterns challenge, recreate or widen the gendered structuring in societies. In this paper emphasis lies in glimpsing the women pedagogy in-relation to other forms of hierarchies, while at the same time on how both genders responds and contest differences within them. The constructive binaries of 'us' versus 'them' will also be taken account into. Perhaps sole attention lies on knowing what is the position of women in today's time? Or what it feels like to be a woman at the onset of all-masculine hegemony?*

Keywords: gendered role-expectations, socially constructed, power difference, women pedagogy, hierarchies, and masculine hegemony

1. Introduction

Few time back while watching a popular Indian soap opera, I witnessed a scene wherein two men were casually talking on how their respective wives do 'nothing' other than being full time housewives. And later I wonder what impact will these popular stereotyping will have had in an already patriarch country like ours whereas the other side of my mind constantly recalling Walby's (2002) findings, how housewives are involved in an unequal exchange relationship, knowingly or unknowingly. And worst being her 'hard-work' *staying invisible* or rather rendered so. Same can be related with Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) critiqued on the 'western notion of burqa' as representing extreme subordination and exploitation on the Muslim women specifically the war-ridden Afghani women wherein in actuality it's a form of clothing having historical and cultural relevance and requiring a serious appreciation rather seeking to 'save' the others.

With the emergence of 'anthropology of women', women's problems began to get represented better in anthropological writings and soon the initial problem of *invisibility* was identified as one of male biases, i. e. *androcentrism*. Edwin Ardener (1975) looking into this dilemma proposed a theory of 'muted groups', thereby arguing that the dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant modes of expression and the muted groups are silenced by the structure of dominance. At such a juncture, women cannot use the male-dominated structures of language to say what they want to say, to give an account of their views and therefore the free expression of the 'female perspective' was somehow blocked out. Hence with coming of feminist anthropology, it was not only about 'adding' women into the discipline but also *confronting the conceptual and analytical inadequacies* of disciplinary theories.

The boundaries of the new feminist anthropology are structural and pose types of questions, which includes:

- What do 'male', 'female', 'sex' and 'reproduction' mean in any given culture...? (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, 2)
- Are women universally associated with nature and men with culture? (McCormack and Strathern 1980)

- What factors contribute to women's subordination in various cultures? (Young, Wolkowitz and McCullagh 1981)

The On-going Debate

Historically many feminist have understood 'woman' differently; not as a sex term but as a gendered term (relying entirely on social and cultural factors) and in doing so, they distinguished sex (being female or male) from gender (being a woman or a man). This outline and distinction on 'sex' and 'gender' is a heated debate for feminist anthropologists since a very long time. Margaret Mead (1928) in her ethnographic work gathered a lot of observations on gender and came out with the preposition that the dominant notions of masculine and feminine features vary across culture. On the other hand, Sherry Ortner challenging the biological determinism through her thought provoking essay raised lots of heads for evaluation. Ortner (1974) says "*The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact... Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions.*" These 'universal fact' and 'cultural variation' were intellectually challenging and problematic for her, for she tries to expose the social and cultural 'logic' behind such connotations-assuming an inferior status to women.

It cannot be denied that culture (at some level of awareness) asserts itself not only distinct but *superior* to nature and that belongingness comes from the ability to transform, i. e. 'socialise' and 'culturalise' nature. Women's pan cultural '*second class status*' could be identified or symbolically associated with nature as opposed to men who are identified with culture. But is it really so? Why women are seen as being closer to nature than men? Three facts come into highlight:

- Woman's body and its functioning are more involved with '*species life*', which seem to place her closer to nature in contrast to man's physiology, whose existence frees him more completely to take up projects of culture.

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- Woman's body and its functions place her in *social roles*, considered to be at lower order of the cultural process than man.
- Woman's traditional social roles give her a *different psychic structure* which unlike her physiological nature and her social roles is seen as being closer to nature.

But Ortner (1974) in protest, states woman in reality is nowhere closer to nature than man. Both have *equal consciousness*, are *mortal* and it is just that she appears so... which in turn gets embodied in institutional forms; thereby reproducing her situation. No doubt woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction is more a part of nature than man. Yet her consciousness and *participation in human social dialogue* gave her a platform as participant in culture, leading her somewhere in *intermediate* between culture and nature. She is also entrusted with the task of 'early socialisation' of new born infants from mere organisms into cultured humans. Levi Strauss, putting forward his concerns also points (1969) transforming the raw into the cooked represent the transition from nature to culture; so is woman's role in domestic unit aligning with this important culturalising process, triumphing over nature. Thus her '*membership*' and full participation in culture are recognised by culture and cannot be ignored. Ortner proposes at the end that efforts directed solely at changing cultural assumptions cannot be successful unless the institutional base of the society is changed; to support and reinforce the new cultural view.

Gendered Equations

The assumption on the domination of men and the subordination of women is more or less a universal equation. Since *biological difference* is attributed to be 'natural', *hierarchy* is also treated as 'natural'. Keeping this point, feminist anthropology as a field came up with concerns revolving around gender inequalities and oppression in most societies across the world as well as to tackle the *absence of women's subjectivity* in the production of knowledge.

A famous quote by Simone de Beauvoir (1953) says "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*". Perhaps, gender is not only a *cultural construction* imposed upon identity but is a process of constructing ourselves. Even if the term is rightly understood to be constructed by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language but question arises; in what sense do we construct and in the process become gendered versions of ourselves? On this note, Judith Butler (2009) adds "... *gender is a contemporary way of organising past and future cultural norms, a way of situating oneself with respect to those norms, an active style of living one's body in the world*". Similarly Ortner (1974) believes one of the great puzzles of the '*women problem*' remains she accepts her own devaluation and takes into account the cultural point of view. Although the fact is her full involvement in culture's project of transcendence over nature remains tremendous. At another instance Beauvoir (1953) states "*the desire to interpret maternal feeling as organic necessity or to universalise a cultural option discloses a deeper desire to disguise the 'choice' one is making*". If motherhood someday becomes a '*choice*' for the females, just wonder what else is possible? Perhaps this

question often terrorize the minds of the other gender while at the same time endangers the social sanctions, values and restrictions put down in order to maintain masculine supremacy.

Privileges of Partial Perspectives

Donna Haraway (1988) believes '*feminist 'objectivity'*' is all about limited location and situated knowledge rather transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It's about getting to know better how meaning and bodies get made. In that sense another key feminist scholar, Lila Abu Lughod's contribution in breaking stereotypes of the West towards the rest must be acknowledged. She questions why feminists in or from the West need to wary or be obsessed with the plights of the Muslim women?

Lughod in her thought provoking article (2002) asks the then First Lady-Laura Bush's radio addresses (post the tragic attack on New York's World Trade Centre and the U. S Pentagon), why knowing about the 'culture' of Afghanistan, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment on women was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the US role in this history? Instead of politico-historic explanation, the world got exposed to religious-cultural one wherein the Muslim women in general and Afghan women in particular became *centre of attention*, tactically ignoring the complex entanglements. She also intervened on how British colonialism in South Asia too 'used' sati, child marriage and other practices to justify their exploitative rule. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) have cynically put in "*White men saving brown women from brown men*".

In her defence to this '*partial perspective*' of the West on the Muslim women's veil or burqa, Lughod (2002) writes "*we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom... perhaps it is time to give up the Western obsession with the veil and focus on some serious issues with which feminists and others should indeed be concerned*". Understanding how things work technically, socially and psychically ought to be a way of embodying feminist objectivity. She warns further the Third World feminists to be careful on not falling into the polarisation trap; that places feminism on the side of the West. Giving a counter attack on the popular '*terror-ridden*' beliefs on burqa, another feminist anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1982) writes "*Many saw the burqa as a liberating intervention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men*". Haraway (1988) too believes that the standpoint of subjugates are *knowledgeable* and their standpoints must be preferred more because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. Perhaps, anthropologists '*passionate detachment*' requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality wherein knowledge must be tuned into '*resonance*' not to dichotomy.

Feminism as a Liberating Force

The anthropology of women (a precursor to feminist anthropology) was successful in bringing women 'back into view' in the discipline, which happened in a *more remedial way* rather than radical. In this context, the vexing relationship between feminism and religion is perhaps most manifested and women's participation in and support for various movements provokes strong response across a broad range of feminists.

Saba Mahmood in her 'Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject' (2005) writes "*The pious subjects of the mosque movement occupy an uncomfortable place in feminist scholarship because they pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status*". Perhaps their active participation challenges the principles of female subordination thereby posing a dilemma for feminist analysts. For the Western media; creation of a passive, submissive image of Muslim women as well as feminine virtues like shyness, modesty and humility becomes a necessary pre-condition for sustenance. However the new emerging women's agency '*Subaltern Studies Project*' appears as a hope to restore humanism, irrespective of fear of becoming a threat to the Western perspective. Mahmood (2005) writes "*The Mosque Movement in Egypt organised by womenfolk emerged in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a means of organising daily conduct, had become increasingly marginalised under modern structures of secular governance... and they argue that this secularisation had reduced Islamic knowledge to an abstract system of beliefs*". Lughod (1998) recommends instead of looking at such movements as an *act of opposition*, they should be understood as reinscribing '*alternative forms of power*'.

Today some kind of *positive conception of freedom* still continues to pre-dominate in projects of feminist historiography, which seeks to capture historically and culturally specific instances of women's self-directed action, unencumbered by patriarchal norms. For any individual to be free, her action must be the consequence of her '*own will*' rather than of custom, tradition or social coercion. The feminist understanding of '*self-realisation/ self-fulfillment*' by considering class, race and ethnicity has necessarily forced them to *rethink the concept of individual autonomy* in light of other issues. Lastly, it can be concluded with the note that feminism in the recent era had somehow succeeded in offering a direction to women's status across culture as well as provide them with prescription for changing the situation of some who are considered to be marginalised, subordinated or oppressed. The articulation of conditions of *relative freedom* allows them to formulate and enact self-determined goals and interests, which remains a pre-condition in their politics and theorising.

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