

# Framing Feminist Research: Critical Impasse and Paradoxes

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## Abstract

While feminism as a political thought is an oppositional logic against androcentric practices of modernity feminist research as a meaning making process is framed along modern paradigms. This inherent contradiction in feminist ideology and research extends a critical impasse while contextualising feminist research. This essay attempts to reframe feminist thinking and methodology incorporating ethics as a primary criterion in designing feminist epistemological practices. It also investigates the complexities involved in intersectional approach and urges a refashioning of feminist methodology devoid of paradoxes.

**Keywords:** Feminist research, Feminist epistemology, Feminist methodology, Third wave feminism, Indian feminist research, intersectional feminism.

Recently, during a discussion on my newly released book, I was asked by a contemporary feminist what kind of feminism did I affiliate with as an academic. It was quite a difficult question, as the book in its introduction critically engages with the category of feminism in India in its inability to incorporate the experience of religious and practising Muslim women into its fold. This question often baffles many of us who work within academic

research frameworks and use the labels of feminism and feminist research to describe our research concerns. While feminist research indicates a meaning making process that involves representation and conceptualisation of women's experiences and the world(s) they/we inhabit, feminist politics also demands one to commit to its ideological and ethical cause for social change and equality. While the former can anchor on strict adherence to parameters of objective research the regimes of hierarchies in academia demand if required, it is almost impossible to maintain objective distance regarding the latter. This brings us to a possible answer that feminism primarily needs to be ethical- the ethical dimension of feminist research is primarily what makes feminism different from other epistemological practices.

## Research Methodology as a Meaning Making Practice

I keep thinking of the following principles while entering a research context:

- Why this research is important and what can I contribute to this field?
- Why my subjectivity is crucial in my engagement with this research topic?
- What is my familiarity with the people, narratives, locations in terms of their heterogeneity?
- How far am I willing to let go of my convictions and political inclinations to ethically engage with my research context?
- Will I be able to reframe my research interest and methods if my theorisations deconstruct the multiple realities of peoples and histories I engage with.

All these concerns point to the fact that what designs the methodology that needs to frame the field of study is primarily determined by the ethical implications of the undertaken research.

## Feminist Ontology, Epistemology and Subjectivity.

Feminism functions as an oppositional epistemology against patriarchy, androcentrism, sexism, oppression, and many other similar formations

in the existing knowledge practices. Feminism is critical of modernist epistemologies for being androcentric and therefore demands a revising of modernist paradigmatic frameworks. Feminist scholars initially started questioning epistemological practices describing that the male experience and male perspective frame the female experience most often. This presentation of female experience through male narratives and frame works invariably depict women's experience as lacking and less than perfect. While discussing feminist research methodology in, "Learning Critical Feminist Research: A Brief Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies and Methodologies," Britta Wigginton and Michelle N Lafrance points out citing many scholars:

...Feminist scholars across disciplines have shared a joint commitment to the task of re-writing knowledge in explicitly non-androcentric and decolonizing ways. Together, they have worked to understand how 'conventional' approaches to knowledge production, colloquially termed "good science", might "promote or obstruct" the (re)making of democratic societies and gendered relations (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 2009). Part of this inquiry has involved a thorough consideration of the way in which science can be viewed as an institution, in much the same way that healthcare and education are institutions (Harding & Norberg, 2005). As an institution, science is complicit in governing, classifying and controlling populations by producing particular 'truths' about certain people/groups (Harding & Norberg, 2005)—truths that are far from being neutral, but are complicit with colonial, capitalist and patriarchal structures, and which ultimately reinforce an unjust status quo ... In response, feminist scholars have made evident the ways in which biases inevitably arise throughout the research process (including which research questions are (not) asked, funded, published, and circulated), to demonstrate the value-laden influence of science, which has historically resulted in the privileging of some knowledges over others... ( Wigginton and Lafrance,

2019)

In a comprehensive understanding of the departure from conventional science by feminist epistemologies Wigginton and LaFrance identify three practices- the feminist empiricism, the feminist standpoint and turn to language movements like postmodernism, post structuralism and social construction to label feminist practices. The feminist empiricist insists on locating the reality or truth which is out somewhere through an objective analysis of the 'facts.' In this mode objectivity of the researcher forms the foundation of a better epistemological practice free of sexism and androcentrism. As opposed to this there is feminist standpoint theory which rules out objectivity and dwells on the social situatedness of knowledge. More recent descriptions of standpoint theory promote plurality and intersections of marginalised identities. The third feminist project is of social constructionism which rules out possibilities of objective truth favouring the relative nature and plurality of truth. Language is looked at as a medium of representation that is controlled by dominant power structures (Wigginton and LaFrance.) The strength of feminist standpoint scholars is the epistemic privilege gained through their social locations. Social constructionism enriches feminist standpoint epistemology by rendering knowledge as contextual to one's experience and identity. Both these categories look at empiricists sceptically because what the empiricists announce as real or essential nature of knowledge, are pointed out as privileges from certain dominant and socially powerful locations.

## Social Justice, State, Feminist Politics

It has to be agreed that feminist reconceptualization of knowledge goes along with social justice movements both inside and outside academia. However, if we assess the welfare state project from the beginning, women have been designed as participants outside the centres of power, relegating them to roles of care givers and marginalised participants. Moreover, the racialisation of nation state disclosing the hierarchies that constitute the entire rights distribution system problematise all discourses on social justice. While the initial feminist activism and therefore the academic projects associated with it focused on demanding equal rights from the state which epitomised the patriarchal centre in many ways, the disintegration of the

essential citizen into multiple identities made it impossible to have a unified discourse on rights. In “Problems for a Contemporary Theory for Gender,” Susi Tharu and Thejaswini Niranjana observe:

Although gender analysis, like class analysis, had pointed to how the humanist subject and the social worlds predicated on it functioned in such a way as to legitimize bourgeois and patriarchal interests, both Marxist and feminist politics continue to operate with the premises of secularism-democracy invoked by the humanist subject. They fail, therefore, to account for inequalities of caste or community implicit in that subject and its worlds or to radicalise the concepts of secularism and democracy to meet political requirements in our times. We shall be arguing in this paper that these problems call for an investigation and critique of the humanist premises that not only underwrite the politics of dominance, but also configure the ‘subject of feminism.’ (Tharu and Niranjana, 1994)

This problematisation of the humanist subject that forms the basis of discourses on rights both by Marxism and Feminism especially after the Mandal/ Masjid years in India demands a revisioning of feminist ideals. Using multiple instances of women’s visibility, the authors exposed several problematic concerns for feminism and the conceptual universalisms feminism adhered to in the earlier contexts: Thus produced, this human subject, on whom the whole question of ‘rights’ is predicated, was imaged as the citizen subject and the political subject. In the Indian context, for example, this imaging (a) articulated gender, caste and community (and initially even class) only in the realm of the social; (b) marked these as incidental attributes of a human self; and (c) rendered invisible the historical and social/cultural structuring of the subject of politics. The shaping of the normative human-Indian subject involved, on the one hand, a dialectical relationship of inequality and opposition with the classical subject of western liberalism, and on the other hand, its coding as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu and male. The coding was effected by processes of othering/differentiation such as, for example, the definition

of upper-caste/class female respectability in counterpoint to lower-caste licentiousness, or Hindu tolerance to Muslim fanaticism as well as by a gradual and sustained transformation of the institutions that govern everyday life. Elaborated and consolidated through a series of conflicts, this coding became invisible as this citizen-self was redesignated as modern, secular and democratic (Tharu and Niranjana, 1994). Thus, the right bearing citizen, disguised as modern secular and democratic, but carrying the “coding” of “upper-caste/middle class/ Hindu/ male,” in the Indian context creates multiple forms of oppressions and relegations. In this situation the discussion of women’s rights inside and outside the academic discourse raises concerns in terms of subjects/objects of research. This essay that describes the most important political events that defined the political society of India in the 1990s, prophecies the complex identity concerns raised by Dalits Muslims and Queer identities in the years to come in their apprehensions about feminist activism and research. Like the feminist critique of heterosexual upper caste middle class male who represented the ‘human’ in human rights, the sections of women excluded from the centre of rights discourse, raised concerns regarding the feminist universalisation of women’s rights. In this context it is important to bring back feminist concerns raised by women of colour in the United States, and elsewhere critiquing the patronisation of white feminists. In *Feminism is for Everybody* bell hooks argues that feminist movement had never been neutral and had been divided between reformist and revolutionary thinking:

From its earliest inception feminist movement was polarized. Reformist thinkers chose to emphasize gender equality. Revolutionary thinkers did not want simply to alter the existing system so that women would have more rights. We wanted to transform that system, to bring an end to patriarchy and sexism. Since patriarchal mass media was not interested in the more revolutionary vision, it never received attention in mainstream press. The vision of “women’s liberation” which captured and still holds the public imagination was the one representing women as wanting what men had. And this was the vision that was easier to realize. (Bell hooks,

2000).

Bell hooks is harshly critical about the demand for gender equality without social change. Similar to bell hooks' argument, in the Indian context caste and religious subalternity share a crucial role in decoding feminist concerns. Indian mainstream feminism, often marked by the logic of gender equality highlighted by upper caste Hindu women, is not inclusive and is highly patronising according to many women from Dalit and Muslim backgrounds. Feminists have engaged with this concern during the Nirbhaya protests, showing the enormous disparity in feminist protests on Nirbhaya case and the subsequent issues when Dalit women were sexually assaulted (Kannabiran, 2014). Women in Kashmir finds it difficult to identify with a nation imagined in the form of a Hindu goddess says Mrudu Rai (Mrudu Rai, 2011). Left liberal Politics so evident in mainstream feminist movements alienate women from communities who are in conflict with modern aspirations of feminist politics (Sherin, 2021). Further, the large presence of women in today's right-wing political movements- for instance Brexit in the UK or Kar Sevikas in India or *namajapa* women during Sabarimala issue in Kerala, India, demands us to revise the category of gender equality as the defining factor of feminism. It is in this context that we reconsider the ethics of feminist practices/feminist research practices and the need to reconfigure feminism as a nuanced engagement with the question of rights. Joan Scott distinguishes between emancipation and equality and highlights the drawbacks of focusing on political rights, which come with emancipation but ceases to be granting equality ( Scott,2012). State oriented rights discourses often face this problem and Ambedkarite politics, particularly Dalit feminism is critical of the idea of emancipation in India without derailing the caste system that is so central to the Hindu identity in India. Joan Scott also discusses the sexualisation of rights, equating sexual excess with liberal rights, thus marginalising identities that do not promote the liberal experience of sexual desire. Here, desire designs the individual aspirations to freedom and therefore modern liberal thinking and restraint or reason becomes detrimental to this liberal value. Jasbir Puar's conception of homonationalism also resonates similar arguments, and tries to explain how the liberal espousal of gay rights

connotes islamophobia (Puar,2007).

## Intersectionality and Feminist Research

Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in dealing with the multidimensional nature of marginalised subjects' identity(Crenshaw, 1991). The term has become one of the most useful tools in women's studies as it deconstructs 'women' as the central focus of feminist analysis. It collapses the category of women to embrace multidimensional and intersectional perspectives on women's experience along with third wave feminism. What is challenged here is the grand narrative of feminist hermeneutics to foreground multivocality. The feminist attempts during the second wave to police the boundaries of feminist experience is critiqued in the third wave for a non-judgemental and inclusive politics. Observing the different vectors that constitute identity Crenshaw points out:

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite-that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experiences is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling



(Crenshaw,1991).

Intersectionality, according to Crenshaw would bring together identity politics in feminist and antiracial struggles, as the marginalisation experienced in both these realms are intersectional. The racial and sexist experiences are intersectional with other forces of dominant power structures like class that act upon individuals. In the Indian context this framework has been adopted by feminists to a large extent of late to discuss Dalit feminist position (Sharmila Rege, 1998). Intersectional approach has become a dominant paradigm in feminist analysis because it invites scholars to adopt a vantage point, a unique epistemological position stemming from their marginalisation to fashion the new vision of a just society. However, there are critiques against the intersectionality approach especially because intersectional approach doesn't clarify its method of feminist analysis and further, intersectional approach often treats the black woman as the quintessential intersectional subject (Nash, 2008). The intersectional analysis has not yet developed a paradigm (s) outside modern analytical categories. The wide gap between intersectional conceptual methodology and the actual intersectional investigations limits the scope of this research practice. It cannot be ignored that in spite of the excessive critique intersectional feminism places on modern analytical paradigms it cannot still come out of the categories of gender, class race, etc. delineated in a modern framework.

## Reframing Feminist Analytical Paradigms

If ideas of the essential nature of women and universality of gender are to be deconstructed the basic premises of rights debates as a modern paradigm demands revamping. The field of modern rights discourse has been contaminated by multiple challenges raised by particular investigations that focus on the ostracism faced by groups and communities in a modern paradigmatic framework. Joan Scott's analysis of sexual rights discourse, Sara Farris' femonationalism (2017) and Jasbir Puar's homonationalism (2007) are particularly interesting in this area. They all raise concern about the excessive importance feminist analysis places on modern rights, ignoring the strange alliances they form with ultra nationalist and the right wing sensorium. Saba Mahmood's (2005) critical engagement with

modern conceptualisation of gender in a binary formulation with religion elaborates this entanglement.

## Crisis Before Feminist Analytical Framework in India

Since feminist analysis borrows an oppositional framework with regard to modernity's rights discourse in India, Indian feminism also faces a critical impasse like elsewhere in the world. Over the years in India, the rights discourse with respect to gender has been manipulated by the right wing, especially by Hindutva groups to annihilate minority reservations to personal law. We have seen the extreme manifestation of this in the Triple Talaq debates in India (Sherin, 2016). The liberal rights that underlie feminist analysis is more or less inadequate to deal with the complex realities that frame the everyday experiences of many women in India.

There are two major paradoxes that are inherent in the feminist framework in this context: a) since feminism sees itself as a political concept based on modern rights it constantly appeals to the state for the delivery of these rights. While modern citizenship assures these rights and reforms to the idea of rights, modern nation state is not a just system, as critiqued by many thinkers. The state produces its own marginalities and people deprived of these rights. In the Indian system, there are different minorities and marginalised, upon whom the modern state is not a liberal enterprise. Muslims, Dalits, Lower class/caste Christians, Kashmiri people, people from the north east and many others have undergone harsh and inhuman treatment from the state many times. The right delivering mechanism of the state does not function evenly as feminists espouse and feminism does not have the means or methods to address this unevenness while it keeps appealing to the state. One striking example is that of the constant feminist engagement with rape laws in India. Even after multiple legal reforms feminist activism is not able to address this jarring inequality. Mass rapes and state sponsored violence that women from marginalised sections face are beyond the normative feminist approaches to engage with. While there have been feminist narratives on state violence against women, feminist methodology cannot categorise this violence beyond the normal gender paradigm. b) Since feminism asserts the right to equality of sexes its conceptual framework is unable to detach from the large

participation of women in right wing organisations. The huge presence of upper caste women against Mandal Commission recommendations or the large participation of women in the destruction of Babri Masjid or even the alleged presence of women in the Gujarat pogroms to aid rapes of minority women are intriguing instances for feminism to cope with, through the conceptual terrain of gender equality. While women's participation in political movements is a feminist aspiration the ethical dimensions of these acts cannot be detached from the demand for equality, these are hurdles for feminist politics and therefore feminist research to overcome. Intersectionality helps research to look beyond the universal and the essential notion of women, but furthermore a revamping of the discourse of rights may help feminism to engage with the ethical dimensions of its investigations.

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