

Feminist Theory: Politicization of Personal Experience

Ankesh Kumar Jangde ¹, Suresh Kumar ²

¹ Research Scholar, ² Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor,
OPJS University,
Churu, Rajasthan, India.



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Abstract

Feminist theory in a way began with the politicization of personal experience but now it finds itself confronting a paradox. If feminist theory is to retain its political relevance, it must continue to make sense to women in terms of everyday knowledge and practices. Yet the concept of experience has increasingly been problematical and the idea of women as a unified collectivity no longer holds.

Introduction

In everyday existence, we constantly work over, interpret and try to make sense of our experiences for it is never issued in its raw form. This as Smith points out makes us all into practical theorists (Smith 1987). Conversely, concepts and theories are made in and through organised social relations (Smith, 1997: 393). Hence there is never any dichotomy between theory and experience for theory can never be abstracted from experience. The problem is not in the relationship between theory and experience but between everyday lay theorising and more formalized theorising which needs to transcend the localised contexts of everyday lives. This transition is of utmost necessity to feminism for it to retain its critical edge and its explanatory power.

The complex social conditions which shape women's lives cannot be captured and dealt with merely from the perspective of everyday lived experience for the task of theory is to make those conditions intelligible in terms of those lived experience. In addition, women's lived experience is diverse; they are differently located within complex social relations and the forms of theorising they employ for an understanding depends on the cultural milieu they belong to. Feminist theory cannot explain the world for all women, at all times, in all places and thus cannot be totalizing. It favours the local and particular in place of universalising statements. Feminist theory can at best be characterised as a *process* of theorising rather than as a privileged body of knowledge where the term 'theorising' implies that the thinking is fluid and provisional, and continually being modified, whereas 'theory' implies something static - a fixed point of reference. This is in keeping with Mary Maynard's call for *middle-order theorizing* that lay emphasis on grounded generalisations (Maynard 1995). Being attentive to the local and particular, and grounding our generalisations, raises the issue of the relation between theory and research which can be seen as the empirical investigation of women's lives. Theory would be redundant if it does not relate to life as it is lived. Theory here informs the way in which feminists frame their research, and subsequently findings are interpreted through a further

process of theorising. Some theory, however, appears to be completely abstracted from empirical modes of knowing. In fact, there are theories that would deny any possibility of reliable knowledge, or of a 'reality' which has an existence independent of the discourses through which they are constructed. This position is associated with 'strong' forms of postmodernism. Postmodernism shares with feminism a scepticism about universal truth claims which would be an awareness of knowledge as something constructed from specific locations. Like feminism it questions the idea of a stable, pre-social self and is doubtful of disembodied rationality. Despite these points of convergence, however, postmodernism could be seen to threaten the feminist goals as it thwarts the attempt to deal with structural inequalities. They see the world as fluid and constantly shifting so that persistent inequalities of gender, class or 'race' are erased. It follows that postmodernism also threatens feminism's political, emancipatory project and 'breaches the link between politics and scholarship which has formed the important bases for the generation of feminist knowledge'. As postmodernism has been held in considerable regard on the contemporary intellectual scene due to its productive influence, feminists chose to engage with its forms of theorizing amongst others as they wished to extract what might be useful to them rather than turning away from major positions of intellectual debate. The key challenges facing feminist theory were an understanding of the diversity among women and deciphering the complex changing world within which women are variously located. Despite the fast pace and development there are several places in the world where women are still struggling for their very basic rights. Feminist theory for the future needs to acknowledge the specific localised actualities and global contexts which shape women's lives in a changing world which entails a recognition of the several vast, differences among women along with the acknowledge that women are still a recognisable social category in all these local contexts. While women constitute an extremely diverse collectivity, feminism cannot afford to abandon the category women, to ignore the persistent, patterned inequalities between women and men which are evident all over the world. When feminist began to find ways of theorising diversity and working across differences between women and women they learnt that they could speak from specific locations and could never speak for all women. Yet, collectively, and individually, as differently located women, they could think for themselves.

When feminists reach out to postmodernism they remain deeply divided in opting for extreme positions. Some feminists dismiss postmodernism as mystificatory academic pretentiousness, while others see it as the only viable future for a rejuvenated feminist political philosophy. Feminism and postmodernism are the only contemporary theories that present a truly radical critique of the Enlightenment legacy of modernism. No other approaches on the contemporary intellectual scene offer a means of displacing and transforming the masculinist epistemology of modernity.

One way in which to begin to disentangle the relations between feminism and postmodernism, seen as theoretical critiques and cultural practices is to view postmodernism as existing in two generic varieties, one to be referred as 'strong' and the other 'weak', and then to see both varieties in turn operating in 'reconstructive' and 'deconstructive' modes. Broadly, deconstructive modes tend to be more concerned with a critique of the legacy of the Enlightenment and in their strong forms recommend its entire abandonment while reconstructive modes are more concerned with visualizing alternative futures which either transform or attempt to break entirely with those of modernity.

If postmodernism is broken down it may be observed that a particular form of the postmodern which has been productive for feminism in the aesthetic sphere may be problematic for feminist critiques of knowledge and for feminist politics. This suggests, that perhaps feminism would be free to take a strategic position on postmodernism, retaining those aspects which could be useful to a particular goal at a particular time.

Contemporary **strong postmodernism**, owes much to Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). This has been the most influential text in establishing the antifoundationalist effect of the strong postmodern critique of knowledge in its axiomatic assumption of the end of Enlightenment meta-narratives and of the emancipatory project of modernity. His argument being that the commitment of post- Enlightenment thinkers to the practical uses of science and technology in the cause of social justice, and the pursuit of objective knowledge as the foundation of social progress, is no longer a viable or desirable objective.

Lyotard claims that there can be no objective grounds for truth, because science and philosophy are discourses whose 'truths' make sense only in terms of their own internal organisation; there is no external truth to which they refer. He says, therefore, that rationalism fails because it cannot ground its own rational procedures and requires another kind of discourse, narrative, knowledge or 'customary' knowledge, in order to achieve a sense of grounding. Postmodernism treats this customary knowledge as fragmented, broken into a multiplicity of heterogeneous language games with their own internal rules.

There can no longer be any belief in privileged meta-discourses such as nature, history, spirit or pure reason which transcend local and contingent conditions and in which truth can be grounded. What follows from this, for feminism, is that gender, like class, or race, or ethnicity, can no longer be regarded as an essential or even a stable category, nor can it be used to explain the practices of human societies as a whole. It is no longer legitimate to appeal to the category 'women' to ground a meta-narrative of political practice, even when it is for emancipation.

According to the logic of Lyotard's argument, therefore, the continued adherence to meta-narratives of gender would result in feminist theorists being immune to the oppressive ethnocentricity and heterocentricity assumed in all essentialist truth claims about the nature of woman or feminine experience. Moreover, Lyotard's argument implies that any recourse to trans-historical structures as a means of explaining political oppression will simply re-enact those forms of oppression in reverse mode. Political communities founded on the solidarity of shared experience would only be able exist legitimately in local, provisional and attenuated forms. Indeed, the publication of Lyotard's book coincided with a shift in the feminist perception, now prepared for an assault on essentialism and a problematisation of the notion of difference.

Lyotard's powerful deconstructive critique has been of great value in alerting feminists to the drawbacks of essentialism and ethnocentrism in their thought and his notion of heterogeneity holds out the possibility of a pragmatic *dialogue* across groups. But as Patricia Waugh points out the proclaimed 'openness' of Lyotard's thought itself can be contested for his thesis contains its own authoritarian structures of legitimation. Lyotard, like all strong postmodernists insists that the pre-emptive *doubt* of Cartesianism; the idea that everything needs to be doubted until reason delivers

certainty ought to be renounced for an ever open-ended postmodern *uncertainty*. In what follows first, the search for truth through rational critique, must be given up for an endless postmodern ‘dialogue’; and, second, that the assumptions underlying the classic scientific methodology that the truth of a hypothesis can be verified by testing it against observable phenomena too must be abandoned for the acceptance of fictionality and indeterminacy. But the very examples used to proclaim the legitimacy of scientific method as exhausted, get simultaneously mobilised to provide the scientific legitimacy of Lyotard’s own position.

Unlike strong postmodernism, the weak version would be in favour of accepting the human need to invest in grand narratives, but at the same rejecting mono-causal explanations through its insistence that all knowledge lies embedded or situated in particular cultures or cultural traditions within which understanding arises through the practices, customs, traditions and textures of a particular; culture. Through this a shared structure of values, a sense of personal significance, and the possibility of belief in historical progress through collective-engagements which do not require foundations of truth or value is arrived at. In **weak postmodernism** the ideal of objectivity or the impulse toward the *view from nowhere* that is retained becomes tangible when combined with the perspective of the culturally situated and embodied subject. In this way, weak postmodernism resists the Utopian ideals of the strong postmodern *view from everywhere* and the fluid, disembodied and centreless subject who is accounted for.

Weak postmodernism located its origin in **Martin Heidegger** and the tradition of hermeneutic theory. For Heidegger, modernity is characterised by a denial of being-in-the-world. A detached subjectivity has placed itself over an inert nature, looking, speculating, fixing and judging with its instrumental rationalism detached from the world it surveys, distorted by of its own fictionally projected ends. But as Heidegger puts it ‘in clarifying being-in-the-world we have shown that a bare subject without a world never ... is ... given’. Heidegger’s influence on weak deconstructive postmodernism acquires further clarity in the work of **Hans-Georg Gadamer**. The central thesis of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960) is that there can be no Archimedean point outside of culture from which to achieve *objective knowledge*, for understanding exists only in relation to the perspectives (or ‘prejudice’ as he calls it) provided for us through our cultural traditions and these perspectives can never be brought to full rational consciousness.

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