Under the Eastern Eyes: Recolonisation and Debating the Women Question in the Academia

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The study of feminism has been part of the pedagogic discourse of the Indian academia. The post-graduate courses on English facilitate a familiarity with the feminist scholarship across the country. In fact, feminism in its academic institutionalization has been faring well. But there is a growing concern with the future of academic feminism. How much does the formal feminist study respond to the surrounding ground realities and contemporary women’s movements? It seems that the new generation of students has found their way to feminism through academic discourse, and not with the direct engagement with feminist politics and feminist social movements, as analyzed by Robin Weigman in the essay, ‘Academic Feminism against Itself’. Has academic feminism been going away from the grassroots social concerns which effect women in India, from larger inclusion of Women belonging from different classes, castes, races and cultures? In her essay, ‘The Present in Our Past: Presentism in the Genealogy of Feminism’, Jane Newman shows how

We neglect to interrogate our own investments in the need to construct and in our celebratory attitude toward the victors of the feminist movements.

With the shocking increase of violence against women in India and after the stunning revelation that India is the fourth most dangerous nation for women to live here, what is the stance of the young women in the classroom who are getting acquainted with feminism in the academic discourse? What is their reaction to the recent Park Street rape case or the mass-molestation of the teenager girl by about twenty men on the open street in Guwahati or the number of rape incidents which shock us with their shameless continuity and their glaring presence in the media? Does not this knowledge of feminism which creates a kind of academic privilege for the young women, posit a challenge when they face sexism and prevalent gender discrimination, and a yawning gap between theory and the life-world in their day-to-day existence? How does academic feminism respond to the recent debates concerning the Slut Walk, the imposition of burqua in some parts of India and the banning of burqua in some countries like Belgium, France, and Italy etc.? Both the burqua issue and the Slut Walk, and also the various debates concerning the women’s dress, from different angles, engage with the issues of controlling women’s body. The notion of cultural hegemony can be traced here. Cultural policing over women’s body, her dress, and her behavior is deeply entrenched in the patriarchal psyche. When on the one hand wearing burqua is banned, on the other hand, burqua is imposed on Muslim women in some states, like Kashmir. Some years before one Kashmiri militant group imposed the veil on Muslim women. In Kerala also, Muslim women also are forced to wear the burqua. Both in the case of banning of burqua and the imposition of burqua, the same tendency of policing the women and her physical, mental freedom prevail. This also is true for the comment which triggered of the Slut Walk.

Nivedita Menon in her essay, “Refusing Globalization and the Authentic Nation: Feminist Politics in Current Conjecture” studies,
Organizations of the Hindu Right such as the Bazrang Dal and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad have been trying to enforce dress codes for women in universities, claiming that sexual harassment would decrease if women dressed ‘respectably’ and according to Indian tradition.

This same attitude is echoed in the concept that women themselves are responsible for their sexual violation, as if, all the women who were violated in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, in various districts of West Bengal in the recent past were accountable for the violence against them. This enrages and shocks to think how much patriarchal institutions and upholders have gone in their imposition of cultural policing. This kind of moral control on the women’s dress, their behavior and public life in the name of cultural purity creates a sense that the onus maintaining the shame and social respect lies on the women’s shoulder. Actually, communities vest their honour on ‘their’ women and thus, the process of cultural policing begins with marking and drawing women ‘inside’ the community, thus appropriating the conventional gender roles.

Women’s body is colonised when it is used as the space for asserting the tradition. But it is recolonised from another aspect, when it is used as the profitable space to propagate the values of globalization and consumerism. The Slut Walk, the protests against the banning and also against the imposition of burqua, moral policing of women’s dress- all these problematise the issue of freedom of choice. We need to study whether this ‘choice’ is structured by the process of recolonisation from both the ends of globalization and tradition. Early Islamic feminist movement calls for lifting the veil for the emancipation from exclusion. But another aspect of wearing the burqua comes to the front when the Islamic feminist scholar Fadwa El Gundii gives a different perspective that voluntary wearing of veil or hijab offers Liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviours and an increasingly materialist culture.

We may have our personal opinions about burqua. But we must accept that we cannot impose our own views on the name of liberalization. This will cater to the homogenizing culture of Western politics. Recolonisation works at deeper level concerning the women’s experience in India. Is not the ‘be fair’ obsession a mode of recolonisation? Is not it an expression of colonial hangover? Our psyche is so conditioned to hate the dark and in this process, recolonisation sneaks in to our consciousness by normalizing the western notion of beauty. This cultural hegemony is so pervasive that it is rapidly gaining the unconscious consensus from the women in India. It is manifested in the growing demand of fairness and anti-ageing creams and its roaring market-success in the Indian scenario. It is also entangled with the hegemonic control imposed by tradition in India which excessively reinforces the notion of ‘looking good’ and which champions the Aryan concept of beauty of ‘gourabarna’ and marginalizes the Dravidian notion of black beauty. Is not this commodification and homogenization of women’s body and women’s beauty a mode of recolonisation in the world of advertisement and media in India? Is not it feeding the hegemonic discourse of beauty? We cannot simply pass it as women’s assertion of freedom of choice. Here, the politics of unconscious consensus problematises the notion of freedom of choice. It poses, as Nivedita Menon also observes in the same vein, a significant dilemma for feminist understanding. In this context, Menon also attempts deeper analysis,

The contradiction between our belief in the need to assert and protect the autonomy of the individual citizen and our simultaneous belief in the operation of the hegemony of the dominant, power-laden values make the ‘freedom to choose’ so problematic. This deep study of feminist politics in India is closely associated with the discussion of academic feminism and feminist activism. Actually, in India, feminism has sprouted up from activism...
before being academicised. But after the institutionalization, the radical potentialities of feminism are assimilated within the university discourse. Courses on feminism in India in the post-graduate level mostly begins with the Western feminist scholarships and theories and towards the end of these courses, we get a small portion of post-colonial feminist texts. So, here also the post-colonial feminism gets a peripheral position in the formation of academic syllabi. The study of Western feminism covers so much academic space that it marginalizes the post-colonial feminism. So we see that academy is recolonised.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her famous essay, “Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and the Colonial Discourse”, analyses how the ‘Third World Woman’ is homogenized under the Western eyes, under the colonial discourse of Western scholarship. We can notice that the similar policy of homogenization is also plaguing the urban feminism formulated by the urban, educated, upper middle-class elite women. They are taking positions as the intellectual superior, who is privileged to theorise on the women’s struggle, on women’s experiences, women’s movements popping up in the various parts of India. The Indian women, who share multiple dimensions, who are characterized by plurality, are ironically homogenized under the Eastern eyes, under the Eastern scholarship and academic discourse. How much do they incorporate the movement of the Manipuri women against the AFSPA in Manipur or the rural women’s struggle for education, their growing voices against the child-marriages, their movements for self-independence, and economic empowerment in spite of the constant impediments in their socio-economic, political scenario? Women in India, belonging to various cultural, geographical, social, political groups, have been involved in numerous forms of activism against patriarchal subjugation, against the stereotypical gendered roles. How much does the academic feminism correspond to these multiple manifestations of feminist activism?

It is a challenge for the feminist politics to create an alternative space free from the constraints of cultural hegemony of both the patriarchal tradition and the celebratory demonstration of globalization and consumerism and to inculcate this alternative space in to the pedagogic discourse. We need to expand from the rigid framework of theoretical texts to reformulate our academic discourse. It is necessary to blend the academic feminism with the feminist activism. Feminism within the Indian academic discourse should be reoriented to incorporate the live-realities of the larger majority of Indian women, the rural and the urban poor, like female-feticide, child-marriages, dowry deaths, the repression of the khap panchayats and the various forms of sexual violence. This kind of pedagogic reformulations can offer a reinvigorating academic activism in the study of feminism in India.

Works Cited:

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