

# Clashing Subjectivities: Gender, Culture and History

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'Subjectivity' is a term which moves beyond one's relation to oneself; it is grounded in a socio-political context, and is a reworking of the power relationship between 'us' and 'them', subject and object. The terms feminism and feminist theory elude an easy definition. They are fluid, historically caught up in the flow of time and culturally rooted in age-old constructs of the body and of gender relations. The sheer multiplicity of the feminist movement is indication enough of its heterogeneity. Feminist positions are geographically and politically different: Anglo-phone, French, American, Black, Third World, Dalit, Marxist and so on. They are also thickly intertwined with myth, history and philosophy. For the present purposes I wish to work with Foucault's concepts of power and space and their relevance to a feminist reading of texts. Both these concepts work across cultures and time despite all other differences. ...

The social imbrications of feminism are abundantly clear if one works systematically through any text or an act of representation in any other medium of art. "Representation" of the 'femaie: is hardiy ever balanced : it is beauty or the body which is placed centrestage and becomes at once the object of attraction and seduction, or of rejection and marginalization. Emotional and intellectual conflicts dealing with the limited choices available are slow to surface. Patriarchal constructs bolstered by tradition, myth, ritual and religion work as controlling agencies and are often internalized by women. Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus theory is applicable to the institutions of family and marriage as well as to that of education. Feminist struggles very often begin from within these institutions in order to work their relationship to larger social constructs.

Briefly, I'd like to work with some fleeting examples from some nineteenth century texts across time and culture. The opening page of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) brings out Jane's consciousness of her physical inferiority. Physically excluded from her cousins, her questions are also silenced - thus looks, exclusion and silence are foregrounded. Going back a few years, we have in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1817), the five Bennett sisters as representatives of different qualities - beauty, intelligence, pedantic scholarship, saucy, thoughtless and irresponsible behavior - characteristics which attract or act as barriers where the opposite sex is concerned. Marriage is of utmost social importance. Later in the century, Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891) through its subtitle 'A Pure Woman' underlines moral and physical concerns. Tess is considered pretty enough to catch a good husband, especially now that her pedigree is established.

The scene is no different in the early novels in India. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay *Rajmohan's Wife* (1865), in the very first chapter highlights Matangini's beauty which however is 'greatly spoilt by her physical and mental

suffering' (3) and the control on her free movement also comes across. An early short story by Tagore titled "Notebook" (1891) is about a young girl-child whose efforts at self-education are thwarted first by her brother and then by her husband. Her sisters-in-law peep through a crack in the door to spy on her and violate her privacy. Her brother feels no qualms at taking away her 'stub of a pencil' and her 'carefully collected meager store of writing tools' (112). Learning, it was believed, was likely to clash with her learning to be a good wife and Uma, the child bride, placed in a totally new atmosphere is to be denied the solace of confiding her private thoughts to the pages of her notebook. Her husband is worried, 'If reading and writing began than novels and plays would be acquired and it would be hard to preserve the household virtues' (116). Pyarimohan believed that masculine power and feminine power together produced the pure power of the conjugal relationship, but if feminine power was vanquished through education then male power would become paramount. Then male power would clash with male power to produce such a terrible destructive energy that the conjugal bond would be completely destroyed'. (116-117). Apparently the control and molding of female energy was a precondition to constructive relationships and the desire that drove this was the centrality of male desire.

The silencing of women has been the base on which society has traditionally formed itself wherein the productive role is not necessarily an economic one: it is procreative - birthing and the rearing of a progeny. Women, their independence or their personal happiness are sidelined in the process. In Charlotte Perkins Oilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1911) we have the husband John control his wife's creativity through his dual authority as husband and doctor, and thus push her towards insanity. The cloistered space of the nursery generates its own hallucinatory world. In an early twentieth century story in India titled "Revenge Herself, Lalithambika Antarjanam wrote about a real-life case, where the rejected wife, Tatri, resorted to prostitution and adultery, in order to get back at her husband, thus engaging herself in a transgressive act, a violation of the customary image of a respectable woman and in defiance of the moral laws. Here was a woman using her body and beauty for purposes not approved by society thus creating a moral dilemma for other women. Her bodily rebellion was her way of protesting against caste and gender oppression.<sup>1</sup>

My references are brief but I hope they bring out the centre-staging of a woman's body at the cost of her other qualities - intellect, emotion and desire -qualities which go to make a rounded-being and contribute to the formation of a subject-position. The denial of independent access to social institutions and the silencing of the female voice are also evident as is the limited representation of women. Further these narratives, written both by men and women, illustrate the historical discourse that quickened a collective awareness of the gender discourse and pushed it into the political arena when the suffragette battles begun. Feminist movement and theory are intricately embedded in the history of revolutions even though no revolution has actually been effective in a large-scale or total support to it - be it the French, the Russian or the freedom struggles in different parts of the third world, or the 68 cultural revolution in France. But they have

opened out public spaces and debates; they have helped recognition of women as political beings and generated a spirit of collectivity.

In nineteenth century India, the woman question was used as a pawn, as a measure of civilization and as a pawn in the battle-field in the colonial-imperial contest. The division of gender space was firmed by the political situation. Partha Chatterjee in his essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", comments that the problematic relation between nationalism and the women's question led to a shift from modernization to conservatism, choosing to separate culture into two spheres - the material and the spiritual, the outer and the inner and consequently defined gender relations in terms of home and the world. Chatterjee argues that a 'new patriarchy' came into being, an indigenous one, committed to producing a more cultured version of womanhood, different from the one projected in the common woman, who may be vulgar, loud and coarse. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in "Gender and Nation: Iconography of the Past", points out that this was a period when a 'different emplotting of the past was necessary' in order to retrieve a sense of self-respect. The focus was on the way women were 'used/perceived/deployed/ represented in this predominantly masculine project' (118) As a counter between masculinity and femininity, a certain orthodoxy and idealism of 'Indian womanhood' was created, a stereotype upholding sacrificial values and adhering to the Sita-Savitri model, a woman objectified in its representation and missing the subjective agency.

It is in this context that Gayatri Spivak's long essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1986) is relevant. The argument moves in a layered manner as it proceeds to investigate the 'sati' discourse and the absent voice of woman. Set against a dialogue between Foucault and Deleuze, Spivak analyses the concept of power. Originally the essay was titled "Power, Desire, Interest" and the focus of the essay was the representation of the Third-world subject' within western discourse, the underlying assumption being that 'western intellectual production is, in many ways complicit with western economic interests', and some of the most radical criticism, Spivak is of the view is 'an interested desire to conserve the West-as-Subject1 (271). Foucault and Deleuze, even as they dwell on the oppressed margins of society, do not enter into any serious examination of the role of the intellectual, in the act of producing theory. For a moment, the question which demands attention is the relationship between experience and speech. Can struggle/resistance be separated from voice/speech/action? My persona! query is do the oppressed delegate their powers of speech to the ventriloquist? (Abundant evidence is available in retailed narratives, confessions and experiential accounts in the pseudo-autobiographical works as In the Name of Honour and other interview/questionnaire based accounts). Spivak plays with the two meanings of 'represent' - of 'vertreten' indicating representation as proxy - in a political sense and 'darstellen' re-present such as a portrait, aiming at accuracy, outline, a representation. In the anti-sati discourse there is interplay between the two meanings of represent. In fact socio-political representation is split across religion, power and culture; moreover it is located within a political atmosphere where both opinion and law were being created through a foreign government. Spivak traces the process of the codification of Hindu law and the

'epistemic violence of the legal project<sup>1</sup>. (282) With this kind of power control and power generation, the representation of the widowed woman was appropriated by the foreign ruler in the first instance and by the Brahmanic elite in the second.<sup>2</sup> In neither case did the woman find a voice. Power in such cases perpetuates the continuation of the subaltern, and sustains itself on this continuation as does the extension of the sati issue to the public space of governance. Between 'patriarchy and imperialism<sup>1</sup>, the woman is silenced and denied a subjectivity and the body becomes a public space. The question resurfaced with slightly different connotation during the post-partition violence when rape, abduction and appropriation of women were acts of political revenge and restoration of paternal authority. The issue raised question of personhood, of nation and the violation of personal space.<sup>3</sup> Given these embroiled narratives, one falls back upon the discourse of power and space in the formation of subjectivity and especially the emergence of female subjectivity in opposition to the objectification being thrust upon her by rival masculine claimants.

Power, in Foucault's theory is linked to knowledge and to techniques of surveillance as he has expounded in *Discipline and Punish*. In *The History of Sexuality* also draws attention to the act of confession (96). Confession even when willingly given, becomes a source of knowledge for the power wielder, and is often used to afflict pain. Documentation is an additional source as it places confessions in a fixity. Writing a diary, confessing under emotional pressure or under physical duress may have psychological and therapeutic value as they involve communication of some kind, but they are also sources of sharing experiences and knowledge and offer control to the other in some measure. Space vis-a-vis the human being, is also indicative of power or lack of it - travelling, going out without a chaperon, adventure, freedom to move about, to go out and come in at will are instances where this can be tested. The right to choose friends, to build up collectivities, to create heterotopias, to go to school - points towards spatial constructs. In the larger social stratification, the same can be applied to slums, street-children and pavement-dwellers - places which create social hierarchies and power structures.

In the references made to short stories and novels earlier on in this paper, the attempt has been to draw attention to this space. Matangini (Rajmohan's Wife) resists her confines, disobeys her husband first for the sake of company, and later due to loyalty to her sister and to her own moral sense of right and wrong. Jane disobeys Mrs Reed (Jane Eyre) and thus calls upon herself the expulsion both from the Red Room and the Reed household. But this does not happen in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Gillman) or the "Notebook" (Tagore), where resistance becomes self-destructive. Apparently, in order to be emancipatory, resistance has to be other-directed and supported by a degree of self-consciousness. Else one merely surrenders one's will. It is difficult to act without consciousness. One is compelled to ask the question: what happens to the silenced voices? Do they create knowledge for the victim and the reader/viewer / theoretician and do they subvert power? If they do not, they why not? And if they do, then how? Such literary representations and documented narratives spill out of the text and, paradoxically even as they continue a history of oppression, they generate

resisting discourse. The slave narratives of the African slaves and dalit autobiographies are concrete examples. They create new forms of knowledge to help in new power structures.

Adrienne Rich in "The Politics of Location" acknowledges the impulse for change and the growing nature of consciousness she writes : 'It's hard to look back on the limits of my understanding a year, five years ago - how did I look without seeing, hear without listening?... Our old fears and denials - what helps us let go of them? What makes us decide we have to reeducate ourselves ....?' (quoted by Jana Sawicki 286). Rich asks an important question - when does one move from passivity to an active role? And when decide to crack open the mould thrust on one by societal values and patriarchal norms, or by conventions and tradition? The motivation may come from outside but the impulse for change has to rise from the .subject-in-formation. Most oppressed categories begin by sharing experiences, but these experiential narratives are not enough in themselves: one has to move beyond them and it is this moving beyond which is likely to lead to shifts in power. Foucault recognized the dynamics of power: it is circulatory and depends on a whole set of social alignments. Within the domestic sphere, I can point out some stereotypical representations used in popular cinema: the exchange of household keys from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law brought about either through conflict, love, widowhood or some other circumstance. This is visible even in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli*. Power shifts are also marked by spatial shifts, such as separation from the joint family in Ashapurna Devi's *Suvarnlata*, when the middle-aged couple finally moves into their own home and *Suvarnlata* feels that she may finally have a room of her own and freedom from bodily and social roles. (A similar desire is at work in Kundanika Kapadia's *Seven Steps in the Sky*) This sense of freedom is symbolized by shifts, exposure, travel, no matter how brought about. In Tagore's *Istri Ka Pair*, going on a pilgrimage frees the woman from the patriarchal hold, and Tess's move to the farm is a move towards independence, Saru in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* finds freedom in the medical college. Once again one wonders are these 'subjectivities-in-process'?

Subjectivity marks the leap from self-awareness to agency; it is not solely based on power. It goes beyond the concept of 'self which is inward-related and 'identity' which often finds a fixity in social status and class; subjectivity, in contrast, moves into a more liquid state encompassing heterogeneous fields of reflection, social interaction and political positioning. In Julia Kristeva's view subjectivity is always in the making (Hall 99). It is this constant evolution which locates it in the socio-political discourse and simultaneously generates the possibility of change. Individuals are constituted by each other and subjectivity, as Foucault observed, 'the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or ... through practices of liberation, of freedom...'(quoted by Sawicki 288). As Jana Sawicki has pointed out self-interrogation is not merely self discovery; it is also self-refusal (288), deciding and choosing what not to be. Chris Weedon asserts that though produced historically, subjectivity comes into being when the individual subject comes into conflict with its subject-forming discourses. Thus resistance is not only embedded in it, but is also its initiating principle helping to create self-

awareness (Hall 93-97). However, subjectivity also has gender dimensions even if there can be no strict division. Women traditionally have internalized male perceptions of gender roles while societal norms treat the male as subject except under conditions of slavery, subjugation and oppression. Self-awareness has first of all to move out of them. When subjectivities clash they can be between men, between women, between men and women as gender, race and class struggles take place.

And finally, the last question, I wish to address: how subjectivity and the constructs of power and space reflect in and on feminist readings, theories and criticism? For women moving out from object-positions to subject-positions, both individually and collectively, has displaced the institutional practices of tradition, opened out myths and initiated new ways of reading, rendering the text as plural. Feminist theory has pushed a re-vision of historical psychological and religious discourse, encouraging intellectual debates and creating its own discourse in almost every field including the relationship of the body to the moral norm.

When we go back to some of the nineteenth century texts discussed earlier on in the paper, the romanticisation of Matangini's rebellion in Rajmohan's *Wife* acquires an additional dimension. It opens up a discourse on the institution of marriage, the proprietorship of the husband over the wife, the use of violence, the right to privacy, the acknowledgement of desire outside marriage and the violation of the marriage bond. At the centre is placed the moral concern for right and wrong. Is Rajmohan's planned dacoity on his own brother-in-law justifiable? The story shatters the myth of the *pativrata* and works towards a reworking of social space. Lalithambika Anterjanam's story also raises moral issues and leaves them ambiguously defined in order to give the reader some space. But in her autobiographical essays written in the third person she describes her own battle with the *Namboodri* practices. In 1932 Anterjanam attended a meeting organized to honor women who had discarded their umbrellas and shawls. Let me explain that the Anterjanam women on arriving at puberty were required to become indoor inhabitants confined to the house as if caged in those surroundings. And any essential moving out had to be well-covered and protected, hence the umbrellas and shawls. In her essay "We Cast Away Our Umbrellas", she pretended she was going to the temple, but as soon as she left her home, she threw away the umbrella (140). The result was that her mother wept, her brothers treated her as an outcast, her in-laws disapproved. Finally it was her father who came to her help and made a separate home for the couple.

Feminist theory is double-pronged. If on one hand it has constantly to question existing epistemological and ontological positions, on the other it is perpetually caught up in new experiential struggles emerging out of new socio-economic pressures. There is no way it can settle down to any fixity and it is in this that its strength lies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>"And now, tell me sister. Which one do you think was worse, the man who led a woman into prostitution for his own satisfaction, or the woman who willed herself into prostitution to counter him?"(11)
- <sup>2</sup>The white man saves the woman from the brown man'. The woman is willing'.
- <sup>3</sup>See Veena Das. *Critical Events*.
- <sup>4</sup>Feminist narratives have problematized this as the future husband's control on the pre-marital life of a woman; see Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* and Deshpande's *That Long Silence and Small Remedies*. The male ego is tortured by the thought of another man having had a relationship with his object of possession. Freedom from the 'object' position implies a control over one's body. Abortion laws come within this but unfortunately the opposite is also evident in anorexia and similar obsessions with slimming.

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