

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT - A FEMINIST RE-APPRAISAL

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"The legacy of patriarchy which, like the culture of imperialism, is a dubious gift that we can only transform if we acknowledge it"

Gayatri Spivak

Feminism informs that the history of all hitherto existing societies; is conceived of as a history of the subordination of women by and to men. This subordination of women to men, collectivities and the State operates in many different ways, in different historical contexts. Patriarchy has always sought to exclude women from positions of authority outside the family. Though ostensibly different, even antithetical cultural and/or political arrangements are merely variations on the common overriding theme of patriarchy. Beneath the apparent discontinuity of transitory historical forms lies the massive continuity of male domination. Arguably, it is precisely this continuity that allows us to speak of "history" rather than "histories". The historical continuity that it takes as its object is not development but domination; a hegemony of a particular form of reason which is shot through and through with the poisonous passion of patriarchy. It also demands a fundamental break with the present, one that involves the construction of a new form of reason and a new form of power. In our localised cultural context, it is crucial, indeed necessary, that such a history be created in the wake of these contradictions, premised on collective lived experiences of women. The task of feminism today is to realise this political programme - a feminization of historiography.

It is theoretically misleading however, to consider gender relations without contextualising them within ethnic and class divisions in the localised context. It has been recognised that one major form of women's oppression in history has been women's invisibility, their being 'hidden from history'. The invisibility of women other than those who belong to the dominant ethnic collectivity within feminist analysis has been as oppressive. Ethnic minority women have been virtually absent in all feminist analysis. Anthropological and historical differences in the situation of women have been explored, but only in order to highlight the social basis of gender relations

in Sri Lankan society. The heterogenous ethnic character of the latter has never been fully considered.

Post modern critics theorising the woman's question using Foucauldian categories expand the argument further, claiming how a pluralism of powers necessarily gives rise to a pluralism of resistances. Foucault insists on the multiplicity of the sources of resistance and refuses to privilege one as any more revolutionary or universal than any other.

But, this is ideologically a wholly unacceptable position in many respects since Foucault refuses the globalising or universalising influence of patriarchy - an influence that enforces silence on female sources of resistance. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, Foucault's deconstruction of disciplinary discourse/practice betrays all the signs of its masculine origin. His ban on "continuous history" would make it impossible for women even to speak of the historically universal misogyny from which they have suffered and against which they have struggled. His critique of "totalising reason" condemns as totalitarian the very awareness of the

pervasiveness of male domination that women have so painfully achieved and entails an equation of identity with loss of freedom. In short, as Balbus argues else where, Foucauldian geneology "disciplines women by denying them of the conceptual weapons with which they can understand and begin to overcome their universal subordination". However despite the problematique of such theorising, the likely possibility that these resistances ("where there is power, there is resistance") might eventually combine to create a new form of power/knowledge and thus a "new politics of truth" (a simultaneous quest for a non-authoritarian, politically liberatory discourse) should inspire hope among activists engaged in social transformation and nation creation in the contemporary socius. The success of their efforts would invariably depend on their ability or willingness to integrate

A re-examination/re-conceptualisation of the experience of the terms of women's emancipatory struggles in an urban/rural theoretical grounding would be a "politically correct" position for women in re-defining their roles and identities at this historical juncture (with International Women's Day falling on March 8th) as they stand summoned to making, unmaking and re-making history in shaping and guiding their own destinies.

the difference of perceptions of social reality and the profound differences between the social experiences of women. It must be noted here that the context specific struggles of ethnic Tamil/Muslim minority women have rarely influenced analyses of gender relations. Hence the need to take into account the ethnic diversity.

Virtually everywhere the interests of the 'nation' or the ethnic group are seen as those of its male subjects and the interests of the 'state' are endowed with those of a male ethnic class or not just a class which is 'neutral' in terms of ethnicity and gender. Nation states come to represent this masculinised power constructed and exercised by male agency. How effectively women will challenge this power relation which continues to ideologically de-centre their lives as society's margins, remains a battle yet to be won.

At the popular level of the political discourse, there is positive rhetoric about elevating women's status in society, and recognising their role in social reproduction of mothering and nation building and production of knowledge. At a more personalised political level, however, women are disadvantaged and marginalised solely because they are women. In industrial zones, women as workers are exploited and discriminated against; denial of basic socio-economic rights to food, housing, healthcare, transport; suppression of civil and political rights to organised action and unionise. Women as political campaigners voicing against violence, state repression and systemic harassment and discrimination of ethnic minority communities were hounded out as anti-systemic forces. The increasing number of battered women of domestic violence makes the notion of the sanctity of family a subject of ridicule.

Methodology of Revolt

Differences in the nature of social protest/political mobilisation in the urban/rural dichotomy have put the women's movement in a fundamental dilemma. While the positioning of the "woman's question" in many of the ongoing feminist debates has tended to reflect the urban based middle class women, such a citycentric conceptualisation has led to the further exclusion of the identities and histories of "other" women - those socially active, politically disinclined women concentrated in the suburbs and countryside.

Women's experience of grassroots activism in the last two years, has demonstrated the very Colombo-centric nature of women's political struggles. Obsessed with the idea of a formation of a socialist/democratic social order, women took upon themselves the task of political mobilization demanding a transformation of the anti-democratic authoritarian system. The overwhelming number of Colombo-based middle class women's activists who came to dominate these "campaigns", points to the class base of the women's movement. The ideological battle lines in terms of generalised slogans, placards and banners with captions "your vote is a democratic right", "stop the war" and "no to violence", seem to negotiate a case

in favour of democratisation of society rather than use of the political space for a specific, well-articulated gender agenda to address women's concerns. The culture of appropriation and manipulation of women for a specific political programme based on radical rhetoric and populist sloganeering historically and politically has proven to be disastrous for conscious women, (from the point of view of their empowerment), committed to the goals of social change.

However liberating and empowering the experience of social protest and political activism has been, women will have secured few victories and won few battles if their activism has failed to question/articulate issues of power, violence and rights ideologically and in a manner consonant with everyday practice.

The tendency to publicly mobilise under universal themes and engage in politics of public campaigns acceptable to popular will and praxis helps undermine all other forms of personalised political activism in terms of grassroots organising which sensitively addresses delicate, humane, psychological issues of trauma counselling for abused women and those who have suffered as a result of the general political violence in the aftermath of violent ethnic/civil conflicts. The fundamental problematique of methodology (therefore of discourse) of problem defining tends to feed into a claim of superiority vs inferiority, i.e. hegemonic vs subaltern? Feminist theoreticians and activists of public campaigns are superior with relative political autonomy and freedom while self-sacrificing grassroots women are inferior because they are largely invisible with restrictions on their freedom and therefore disempowered. Arguably, both these two different mechanisms of how women's issues are introduced leave them feeling totally disempowered and peripheralised.

In the ideological practice of re-claiming and re-negotiating rights and power, women who articulate gender issues institutionally are privileged with credibility and integrity, a form that is acceptable to the patriarchal political and social order. This is a dominant feature with regard to the universal discourse of human rights and violence against women. In the localised social context and at grassroots level, rights have yet to take roots and women still to articulate a rights ideology based on their lived experience.

It may be a legitimate argument to point out that with the differential impact of modernity, a legacy left by colonialism and built on by the state, the distinction between rural/urban divide became sharper. Centralisation of power and capital accumulation in urban cultures, in terms of access to information/knowledge, technology, skills, training etc., privileged urban-based social classes who have access to the use and control of these resources.

While the eternal quest for a new women's culture remains unfulfilled, women's capacity to create a cultural space through cross cultural analysis, theatre groups, discussion sessions for social interaction may have the potential of bridging widening gaps that stand in the way of achieving fundamental changes in the lives of women resulting in a new sensibility and new social order.

Backlash

Women's multiple identities which occupy centrestage of many gendered discourses and their image in the patriarchal public gaze (media) which face a gendered-backlash have come to be viewed in a narrow theoretical and epistemological frame which owes its key features to a "masculine" viewpoint. Feminist political activism against the racial repression of ethnic minority women (rape, torture and murder) by forces of coercive power, heightened and intensified unprecedented levels of political consciousness. Assertions of ethnic and nationalist loyalties, attempts to preserve culture from being subverted, collective claims to a historical past and the sense of unity derived from being assimilated into a particular community have affected the way in which women conceive their identity vis-a-vis nation.

Conflicts based on ethnicity and identity politics and the resultant oppression of women within a socially repressive, militarised context, negate women's capacity for expression and resistance. For their bodies have acquired a new power that needs to be regulated and suppressed. Female bodies have been metamorphosed themselves into sites of power where the battle is being crushingly fought. As Sandra Bartky rightly points out to overlook the form of subjugation that endanger the feminine body (be it political repression of female sexuality through modern forms of reproductive technologies or the nationalist appropriation of women in nation building) is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these 'disciplines' have been imposed.

Can the subaltern speak in the actual site of location? What alternative forms of power have women access to in resisting this narrowly constructed hegemony? If hegemonies can be resisted by counter hegemonies can such hegemonies be without dominance? Can women who are symbols of the nationalism of the repressed be able to embrace sisterhood and commonalities in fighting for a common feminist political agenda of change. Are differences and barriers; ethnic, class,

caste, ideological, transcendental? These are some of the complex dilemmas that need to be carefully scrutinised and resolved.

The backlash against women political leaders who have come to dominate the public sphere in South Asia reinforces how hegemonic patriarchy is experienced by women. The ideological construction of women positioned in binary oppositions is based on the morally good/licentious dichotomy. As Malathie de Alwis in a perceptive paper has noted, this moralistic backlash against women leaders, particularly in the South Asian political landscape seem "centrally premised on the fact that if a woman does not conform to patriarchal norms of 'respectability', she is a disgrace". The 'idealised' woman in the patriarchal discourse is also the privileged woman holding high office who conforms to male norms and as Chatterjee argues "is positioned to lay claims to her prerogatives in the public sphere without endangering her femininity".

Insinuations arising from institutional sexism and gender bias such as "women lose their sense of purpose", "widow is incapable of ruling the nation" hurled at women confirm the view that women still live in a patriarchal society that is hegemonic. Paradoxically, women in the public gaze are held up to ridicule and scorn by other women, which adds another dimension to this gendered backlash. Very often women themselves participate in the process of subordinating and exploiting other women. i.e. in the context of national liberation movements, structures of unequal gender relations [power] posit hegemonic women against other [sub]altern women, often resorting to violence as the means, as a 'disciplining' influence in resisting opposition, in creating 'docile bodies'. A counter ideology to overcome hegemonic patriarchy necessitates a complete cultural transformation. Patriarchy is not an isolated part of, but rather a pervasive presence within, any given human society. It is imperative that the struggle against patriarchy be understood as a struggle for an entirely new culture, a culture without domination. ■

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: AN OBSTACLE TO DEVELOPMENT

by

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