

GENDER AGENDA REASSERTED!

In the current debate around modernism and post-modernism both sides claim feminism for their own. To feminists each offers possibilities. Post-modernism holds out a tantalising analysis of processes, dynamic interaction and fluid boundaries. The plurality of voices and myriad perspectives which must be allowed their part in debate offer new potentials for democracy. Or do they? The rigidification of the idea of difference can lead to a perpetual juggling act in which oppressions remain mid-air. Universalist theories, like Marxism, on the other hand, seem to point clearly to the possibility of progress and change. Nonetheless, universalists' faith in male definitions of rationality make the promise of change seem open to the re-invention of patriarchal hierarchy. In this context it is important to remember that feminism is a contested zone. It does not cling to one method of analysing social relations but subjects itself to critical rethinking.

This critical rethinking is necessary given the changing nature of social and sexual inequality. This does not mean that feminist epistemology remains abstract. The Beijing Conference on women reminds us that issues such as sexism, racism and fascism necessitate not only a deconstruction of language and gender arrangements but praxis. This Gender Issue of Pravada focusses on the issue of violence against women. Despite rhetoric about women's advancement, it is clear that violence against women remains one of the main obstacles to gender equality. "Women shall be especially protected...against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of assault", says the Geneva Convention. Yet in almost every modern conflict, rape is seen as a legitimate spoil of war. And Radhika Coomaraswamy reminds us that 60% of women interviewed in a sample survey in Sri Lanka acknowledged that they were subject to domestic violence during their period of cohabitation. What feminists recognise is that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. Challenging women's oppression requires a commitment to identifying networks of power which bolster oppression, even if these networks are diffuse and our understanding partial. We can and must make a distinction between anti-foundationalism (foundationalism being acceptance of knowledge which has transsocially firm foundations) and the ability to grasp the meaning that people make of their world. A rape is not only a text, the bruised bodies of battered women are not only 'figures'. They are human beings who have human rights. In this context the struggle for economic and political rights has to make the issue of women's rights the focus. Cultural relativism must give way to solidarity on certain issues. Human rights were not invented at Beijing, they must start at home.

Universalism however, as Manisha Gunasekera reminds us in her article, must be aware of race and class differences and contextually sensitive. As a young Sri Lankan woman, youth unrest may seem a more pressing issue than prioritising sexual rights. However Neluka Silva's article, which deals with literary representations of rape and violence against women in Sri Lankan English writing, reminds us that the construction of sexual differences can impinge on women's human rights in a tragic way. Radhika Coomaraswamy's article also highlights the need for immediate action on gender violence. Malathi de Alwis's paper on female portraits as texts is not unconnected. She highlights the fact that the construction of womanhood and its exoticisation can compound race and gender inequities. The construction and reconfiguration of women is a form of representational violence.

Unequal access to resources exacerbates violence against women since it denies women the resources to fight back. Yolanda Foster's article on women and work in Sri Lanka reminds us that the globalization of the international economy has had repercussions on women across the globe. In order to distribute the benefits of globalization women need to struggle against the unequal concentration of power and wealth. Poverty is increasing around the world which entrenches existing inequalities of race, gender and class.

The articles presented here also aim to challenge the marginalisation of gender in contemporary thought. Women's point of view and their absence points to some categorical distortions within theories. If theories fail to adopt a gendered epistemology they suffer a serious theoretical deficit. We need to move beyond dualistic oppositions like modernism or post-modernism and commit ourselves to a gendered theory which grapples with the meanings that people give to their lives. In the global context of rising violence against women and the feminisation of poverty we can no longer avoid questioning the nature of the connection between social and sexual inequality.

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