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Source: *Sociological Bulletin*, September 2000, Vol. 49, No. 2 (September 2000), pp. 267-277

Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620118>

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The Changing Face of Feminism: Dilemmas of the Feminist Academic

Sherry Sabbarwal

The past couple of decades have seen a profusion of feminist work in the academia, a great part of such work being in the humanities and social sciences. Many subjects, such as literature and art, have been influenced and even transformed by feminist writings. The blooming of feminist theory has been accompanied by the emergence of another field, that of Women's Studies, which may take the form of an exclusive department, or topics related to women may be included in different course curricula. Whatever its form, Women's Studies is an integral part of the feminist project, and the presence of the doctrine of feminism and feminist theory within the university education system is an established fact. However, in this write-up, I would like to allude to some problems regarding the theoretical framework(s) related to feminism as also the actual everyday grounded behaviour of those engaged in this pursuit. Is feminism truly a success story? Are the feminist academics fighting against the conservative forces, and side by side, becoming the authors of reform? Or is it all a fantasy, a falsehood, and above all, wishful thinking aimed at deluding ourselves?

I have tried to look at these questions by taking up two issues. First, what is the state of feminist studies today and second, what are the feminist academics actually doing. The first I shall deal with by taking recourse to secondary sources, while the second is examined from my own experiences as a professional in higher education.

Feminism and Feminist Theory

Let's begin with feminism itself. There is always a problem explicating terms like feminism. Simply put, feminism can be defined as the doctrine advancing the view that women are systematically disadvantaged and are Sherry Sabbarwal is on the faculty of the Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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advocating a collective or individual struggle for equality. Defined this way, feminism is a political position. Feminism and feminist are political labels, implying support for the objectives of the women's movement which emerged in the 1960s, and the feminist critique is a distinctive political discourse—a critical and *theoretical* exercise directed against patriarchy and sexism (Moi 1989). However, feminism can also be defined as a social *movement* to achieve certain specified aims. In other words, feminism is the review of past knowledge and also the font of new learning which offsets what was there earlier. But it is also a source of action based on this knowledge, opposing all that which is not feminist, underscoring male domination and demanding rectification. Feminist theory, similarly, is the critical analysis of the dynamics of gender and sexuality, a basic objective of which is to analyse gender relations—to see how gender relations are formed and experienced, how we think of them, or, more importantly, how most of the time we *do not* think of them (Kemp and Squires 1997). Feminism and feminist theory, in this sense, consist of a range of political opinions that seek to analyse and eliminate sexual oppression, in both its theoretical and practical forms.

Feminism or Feminisms?

The variance within feminisms is well-known, based on the different motivations, methods and experiences of feminist academics. Usually, one can distinguish two distinct waves of feminism. The *first wave* spans the period from mid 1800s to early 1900s. In terms of theory, the anti-male-stream theory was the first feminist challenge to male political and social orthodoxy. Male theoretical dominance was considered to be present at the personal, philosophical, and political levels of society. This approach asked the basic questions about the equality of relations between men and women and held that all social and political thought is focussed on sexual domination. It pointed out that like class and ethnicity, gender also needed to be recognised as an independent site of inequality instead of being bunched with an assortment of other inequalities. The main features of anti-male-stream feminist theory during the first wave were—recognition of women as valuable objects of inquiry; the belief that not only are they worthy of being researched, but should themselves be the researchers; the view that women should be political activists questioning male dominance; and the notion of some Marxist scholars that women need freedom not merely from patriarchy but also from racism and a class-based society where they are exploited both as low paid workers and domestic labour (Murray and Tulloch

1997). This view opposed the bourgeois feminism of the class-based women's movement.

On the action front this period saw the campaigns for women's enfranchisement and the extension of civil rights to women as the classical liberal rights perspective dominated the thinking of this period. During the *first wave*, the emphasis of feminism was on equal rights of men and women within society. The first wave feminists demanded equality in a gendered world. They aspired to be like men, looking for equal political, economic, social, and even equal medical rights, equal pay, right to abortion, professional recognition etc. They also believed that the problems they encountered as women and their solutions were universal. However, the main contention of first wave feminism was that it is the patriarchal society that oppresses women and its solution lies in the establishment of formal equality between men and women.

The *second wave* began in 1960s. One of the most significant and visible academic results of feminism during the second wave was the establishment of a new scholastic subject called Women's Studies, which focussed on the till then invisible half population of the globe. Women's Studies came into being towards the end of 1960s. Since university students in those days formed a major chunk of those engaged in social movements, it was natural that the issues they were raising became part of the subject. So, the feminist cause in its second stage was carried on within the universities in the form of Women's Studies departments. Its initial task was consciousness raising, in other words, bringing to fore women's oppression and rectifying the gendered imbalance in social sciences by questioning why there was an almost complete non-presence of women's perspectives in social sciences. The need for the subject of Women's Studies was felt as the academic institutions and organisations were seen to be masculinist in a dual sense (Stanley 1997). In the first place, historically, the knowledge-makers, knowledge-guardians and knowledge-givers (teachers) have been mostly male. For many centuries, these professions and statuses were unavailable to women and only in the last century have women been able to enter this field. Secondly, knowledge is supposedly characterised by rationality, scienticism and universalism, all these features being the opposite of emotionality, the natural and the particular, and all the binaries are associated with the alleged characteristics of the sexes. Hence, the need was felt to develop a subject having women's point of view.

In terms of activity, this period was marked by a widespread growth in educational opportunities for women along with their entry into various previously all-male professions, the establishment of legislation on abortion and equal pay. All this paved the way for feminist activism.

This was also the time when Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminist Mystique* was published and became a cult text. The decade of 70s, moreover, saw the development of broad-based active networks of informal women's groups. In this period, the core of feminism was its radicalism, its ultimate goal being a revolutionary transformation of the society. This was also the time when more and more women were opting for careers.

The institutionalisation of Women's Studies and the entry of women in male bastions was at the time regarded as the crowning glory for academic and activist feminism. However, soon it was being criticised on the grounds that Women's Studies are incompatible with feminism because by becoming part of what is elitist in nature, namely, the system of higher education, they represent either the exploitation or the de-radicalism of feminism and the women's movement. It has even been said that those who pursue Women's Studies only serve their own professional interests. Their energies which should be directed towards the transformation of social relations are now frittered away in narrow scholastic battles for promotion and recognition.

Another question was also raised during this time. Is Women's Studies, as a distinct area of study, feminist in any way? It was argued that the two are very different with feminism being more radical than women's studies. These criticisms were answered by others who argued that there need not be an unsurmountable distinction between the two. For instance, Mary Evans (1982) contended that Women's Studies is Feminist studies. Firstly, because Women's Studies and Feminist Theory both challenge male intellectual hegemony by highlighting, depicting and recording the existence of women and also by showing that the existing knowledge is the outcome of the unequal distribution of social power between men and women. Secondly, although the two are differentiated by saying that whereas feminist studies are always revolutionary, Women's Studies are pro status quo by being part of a university set-up; to counter this, it has been argued that feminism itself comes in many forms—some of them not so radical—and there is no complete unity among feminisms and feminists. It was further added that the connection between Women's Studies and feminist theory is plain enough. All knowledge is socially constructed and as a social construct it clearly reflects patriarchal interests in this process. Women's Studies as a new discipline has incorporated the feminist doctrine of women's oppression and examines how patriarchy is structured. Hence, the two are not opposed in any way and are quite compatible.

Since the 1980s there is talk of a *third wave* of feminism which is given the name of *postfeminism*. The postfeminist theory which includes

elements of poststructuralism, postmodernism and feminist cultural studies, highlights the misogynous nature of the male-stream theory. It tries to study how the world is divided into areas of male interests and how the male-stream theory has silenced all things female and feminine (Murray and Tulloch 1997). The main features of postfeminism include (i) the rejection of universal constructs of truth, objectivity, neutrality, and employment of a theoretical stance which openly acknowledges the role of the observer and the spacio-temporal context within which knowledge is gained, as well as, a plurality of truths; (ii) the rejection of the distinction between the objective knowledge and the subjective opinion, embracing instead the idea of inter-subjectivity (shared effects and functions); (iii) an interventionist orientation associated with concrete practice; (iv) as both deconstructing and reconstructing exercises on the one hand, it challenges the previously accepted discourses, and on the other, it develops new languages, models, methods and procedures; (v) emphasis on difference instead of dichotomous divisions, criticising the male-stream theory and, implicitly, also the first wave feminism for making use of binary oppositions like male/female; instrumental/expressive; body/mind etc., where one term is privileged over the other; (vi) rejection of rationality, i.e., of logic, reason and thought, which is the dominant form of knowledge in the male-stream theory in which the mind and not the body is significant as it is the mind that exercises the scientific method to ascertain truth. Of course, for postfeminism there is no truth, only truths (Grosz 1989).

As mentioned earlier, feminist theory has been influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern analysis. There is now an emphasis on difference and plurality, as it is argued that the traditional feminist analysis reflected the interests of the middle class white women from North America and Europe. This new feminism is more sensitive to local and diverse voices of feminism and rejects a universalistic perspective on a single feminist standpoint. In its new form, feminism goes beyond looking for gendered differences and seeks to identify a sexual differentiation internal to each subject (Kristeva 1981). The ultimate goal of postfeminism is transformation of knowledges which are harmful to women. It has moved beyond the first wave agenda of material struggle for equal opportunity. In fact, that project is seen as 'totalising and sinister'. The new stand is that the postfeminist movement should be based on individuals and the individual's needs. Whereas earlier feminism was concerned with understanding and recording the commonly experienced oppression of women everywhere, the contemporary work emphasises the *diversity* of women's

interrelationships. Hence, the talk of feminisms and not feminism in the singular.

A Critique of Postfeminism

The achievements of the feminist academic/theoretical field have been accompanied by intense and furious disagreements and criticisms. It is said that the shift in postfeminism from a collectivist and political stance to a more individualistic and philosophical one has made it a highly *intellectual* endeavour. Postfeminism is accused of being a theoretical diversion which, while giving us helpful insights on the human condition, weakens the feminist struggle for equality. In the first place, the individualistic orientation of this feminism comes under attack. For instance, Bell Hooks (1984) says that currently feminism seems to be a term without any clear meaning or importance, almost meaningless. Any woman who wants social equality with men is a feminist. The focus is on individual woman's right to freedom and self-determination, women's emancipation, freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex determined role, from society's oppressive restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts and to convert them into action—a liberal definition, evoking a romantic feeling of personal freedom. But, for Hooks feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression, by eradicating the ideology of domination. If the view 'Personal is Political' is taken, implying that woman's everyday reality is informed and shaped by politics, then describing personal woe becomes synonymous with development of a political critical consciousness, thus individualising what is essentially a collective agenda. This individualising position stalls the feminist movement. Secondly, criticism has also come from marginalised women (working class, coloured, migrants) that postfeminism does not address their everyday concerns such as workplace problems, wage discrimination, gayism etc. It appears that although postfeminism recognises, even stresses the idea of difference, this plurality itself turns against women of a certain type. A clear class, ethnic and racial system working as feminists of a particular class, colour, nationality (especially in USA) are dominating the sphere of feminism and show no concern for the marginalised women's causes. The current form of feminism has, thus, been attacked by women of colour and non-western origin for being dominated by the values and interests of the white middle class women and ignoring class, racist and ethnic oppression of women by the feminist movement.

Thirdly, postfeminism is also accused of concentrating only on the overarching theory of patriarchy—the gender issues. But the fact

overlooked is that for non-white, non-European women, the issues of class, colour and ethnic group may be more crucial than the issue of gender. For non-western women, while fighting racial and ethnic discrimination, the allies will be non-western *men* and not western women. So, the women who make gender their main preoccupation are those belonging to the dominant race, class or ethnic group(s). This has been brought into focus by women who belong to the less privileged groups. As Nancy Cott (1987) says in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, the women's rights tradition was historically initiated by and remains biased towards those who have the luxury to perceive themselves as 'women' first as they can gloss over their class, racial and other status identifications which are culturally dominant. Gender is not the only basis of oppression. Rather, there are multiple bedrocks of domination and no single basis can be treated as the key to the rest and all must be considered. Fourthly, postfeminism's emphasis on difference instead of dichotomous divisions has also come under fire since this stress on difference can be further translated into the view that those who are oppressed should identify their own issues and targets and fight their own battle. In other words, no one should speak for the oppressed other than the oppressed themselves. But in real life we all need *universal* categories such as human rights, democratic civil society, sustainable development etc. which may sometimes be the only protection available to the marginalised women due to cultural relativism.

Fifthly, a major criticism also is that postfeminism has made a clear separation of activists and theorists. While postfeminists successfully produce volumes of writings on the feminist issues, they are unable to remodel even their workplaces what to say of the social reality. In fact, postfeminism disconnects women from activism in the name of difference since despite its recognition of women's different needs, or maybe *because* of it, it is unable to foster in them a common commitment to end female oppression. Instead, postfeminism has come to mean that because women have different voices they cannot speak in one voice which is like saying that women have no voice (Murray 1997). This is called the politics of retreat—this casual dismissal of women's struggle. The strongest drawback of postfeminism, however, is the lack of humanism in it. The pursuit of individual's liberation—psychological and physical—ignores this aspect. Humanism involves a value commitment to humankind in general and also to the uniqueness of human personality. And this is the missing link in postfeminism.

In short, postfeminism is accused of abandoning the first wave feminist project of promoting equality between men and women by

developing ideas remote from the everyday problems and discourses of most women. It is criticised for its elitism, its inaccessible language, its anti-activist approach and its neglect of class, ethnicity and race. Consequently, it is alleged that postfeminism is of little help to the needs of the oppressed women and is only useful for theoretical discourses and is neglecting the original mandate of feminism which was liberation of women from oppression and inequality. This is not to say that the theoretical feminism which emerges from academia is not useful; it is essential not to forget that the first pledge of feminism is to transform all theory into practice. Admittedly, since feminism is not limited to a single agenda or unified audiences, and the theoretical discourse does not deny other discourses, it would be reasonable to see feminist theory as just one of the many elements of a wider feminist endeavour. Yet, it cannot be denied that such a focus on the *theoretical* is diverting energy and attention away from feminist *activism*. Its arrival in the academia has coincided with the passing of the once powerful network of grassroots organisations which in 1960s, 70s and early 80s were the very core of the women's movement.

The Feminist Academic

Jane Gallop (1992) identifies the two agendas in front of the feminist academic. The first is to maintain and advance one's standing as a *feminist within academia*. The second is to be an *academic within feminism*. This two-fold endeavour creates an inconsistency of status, both as a feminist and an academic professional. In truth, the professionalisation of feminism has created deep personal uncertainties for the female academic professionals.

Here I would like to speak from experiences drawn from my everyday life as a feminist academic. The experiences are personal but not idiosyncratic and some other colleagues in the same profession, as also professionals in other fields, may find them somewhat familiar. There are problems at both the theoretical and behavioural levels. In the first place, there is the confusion regarding identity. As Davis (1997) puts it, the feminist professional academic is first and foremost a '(social) scientist', then a 'feminist' and only rarely 'female'. In other words, feminist academics are concerned mainly with the analysis of gender rather than with emancipation issues. Secondly, the institutional recognition of feminists has spawned the emergence of the *femocrat* - a new breed who use feminism as a ladder for professional success instead of as a way to transform what goes around them. Thirdly, feminist academics do not seem much concerned about their own construction

and presentation. The subject matter of the multidiscipline of feminism/women's studies/gender studies continues to be the suppressed woman and not the feminist woman. All that is studied are the subjugated creatures, their plight, the causes and the cure, thereby reinforcing the frail, feeble and powerless stereotype of women. Little is said about the resourceful women who have and are trying to bring about change. By leaving out these women, feminism, too, becomes like the disciplines within which it is situated.

On the behavioural front concerning the everyday conduct of the professional feminist academic, the picture is even more dismal. The role of the professional academic in the late 20th century is a topic of great interest. It has been theorised by the postmodernists in terms of the rejection of the age of science and reason. Nevertheless, I believe that although feminist academics have these sublime albeit abstract theoretical concerns as well, but they must also have a more grounded agenda to combat. In my experience, each feminist professional academic (including myself) experiences and displays the inconsistency between her feminist creed and the 'ideal' values, characteristics and attitudes of professionals. Very briefly, I'll touch upon some of these dilemmas.

First, the feminist ideas, far from being a cry against domination and control in any form, become its very sources. As we know, feminist beliefs and values are primarily a critique of the patterns of domination in the society and advocate every woman's control over her life. But as *professionals*, feminist academics believe that their erudition and expertise permit them complete authority over not only their own lives but also the lives of others. This can be seen in their interaction with the support staff, junior colleagues and students. Working as a professional, in this sense, presents profound contradictions to one's feminist beliefs. Secondly, another basic tenet of feminism is the idea of 'sisterhood' indicating an intense personal sense of identification of the feminist with all women, irrespective of class, colour or rank and compassion for all victims of persecution and injustice. As professionals, however, feminist academics may display a disdainful lack of respect for other human beings, especially other women who are non-professional, viewing them as inferiors, be they students, research assistants or clerical staff. Here, again, everyday the feminist professionals are negating their feminism when they exercise their professional pomposity *vis-a-vis* the 'others'. Thirdly, feminism as a movement is based on the view that since the persisting male domination over women is the result of the legitimisation of unequal distribution of privileges, these disproportionate concessions should cease to exist. But feminist professionals, like all professionals,

accept and even demand elitist privileges, which may range from determining one's work schedule, to making use (or misuse) of the support staff or even students to do one's personal work. So, feminists with prestigious jobs, high positions and salaries continue to exhibit a fissure between their doctrine and their being. Finally, as I said earlier, feminism is a movement for change. For an academic it involves the freedom to choose and research issues which are important to women's liberation and emancipation. Yet, in reality it is one's professional interests which determine the questions which should be raised, investigated, discussed and written about—what gets is what sells. One's stamina and efforts are, thus, deflected away from things that count, towards subjects which are usually those that advance the dominant ideologies and are certainly not revolutionary or radical in any way.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The question which arises then is what exactly is the role of the feminist academic professional (and all feminist professionals in general)? Is it that of the metropolitan cultured radical or is it 'just a job in the public sector' (Wise 1997)? Feminism's entry into the educational field was facilitated by various social, political and academic crusades in the west. An embodied theory, situated knowledge and the politics of location were some of the initial demands of feminism (Rich 1979). But in recent times, these aims have been lost sight of in the struggle to become part of the mainstream, i.e., to become feminist professionals working in prestigious universities and other organisations, involving a shift away from the periphery to the centre, into the sites (or seats) of learning and of power that comes with knowledge. Most feminist academics, including myself, are increasingly confining themselves simply to the generation and extension of abstract theory while the more radical and reformative ways of thinking have been, if not abandoned, then at least trivialised.

The expectations most have from a feminist academic is that her feminism is about developing new knowledge, new ways of thinking and, most importantly, new ways of *being*. That is not happening. Instead, there has been a shift from the good old woman liberationist to being a mere armchair feminist, from activist to academic. And because of this, feminism, despite being well established and having grown into an accepted and respected critical mode of analysis, no longer contains the political ethos of the women's movement in the first wave. I do not know the solution to this predicament. One thing is clear. Feminists cannot remedy this situation by staying away from professions. They will

have to work in male defined and male dominated areas and organisations and boldly face the challenges thrown to them both as females and as feminists. Living out feminism is about re-examination and re-working of the dilemmas that we face as females, feminists and professionals. Many women are already doing so, and quite successfully, I may add. What is required further is to combine competent performance as professionals with the celebration of our womanhood, however difficult it may be. Being effective professionals should not mean abandoning the female identity, as well as, compassion for those who may not be in a privileged position like ours. On my part, I hope I have made at least a beginning by boldly confronting these questions instead of hiding them behind a pretentious facade of feminism.

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