

Feminist Anthropology: From Remedial to Radical*

Pushpesh Kumar

School of Social Sciences, S.R.T.M. University, Nanded 431 606, Maharashtra, India

Fax: 26119; email: garud@bom5.vsnl.net.in

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ABSTRACT Androcentrism of academic anthropology has been scrutinised by women ethnographers since 1930s; women were made visible, their role in subsistence was emphasized and the special status accorded to them in culture was highlighted through the efforts of the latter. This endeavour, however, was not only limited in scope but was riddled with serious theoretical flaws. While correcting male-bias, it dangerously came closer to the popular worldview which entails that women also possess power in their "own" sphere and gender relations present a balanced way of life where roles and tasks are neither antagonistic nor concurrent. As a corollary, the question of change and "empowerment" was completely blurred in the process. Realising this limitation of their "sisterhood", the feminist anthropologists around 1980 turned radical, stretching beyond the narrow fore-walls of merely correcting androcentrism. What differentiates this later genre from the previous one is a complete shift in "focus". The radicalism is reflected in both epistemological as well as practical issues of "empowerment" and "change".

INTRODUCTION

Like other disciplines, feminism has made inroads into anthropology. This advent, however, is not sudden; male-bias in ethnographic data were questioned since 1930s. This whole process of questioning (male-bias) crystallized in the form of what is called "anthropology of women" around 1970s¹. Overriding concern of these women-centric accounts was correcting androcentrism in ethnographic data via locating women's importance in culture. While in mainstream anthropology (interchangeably malestream), women were either invisible or painted as beasts of burden, the women anthropologists tried to restore subjectivity and respect to women by charting out the "special privileges" accorded to them in cultures. This enthusiastic surge was, however, not only narrow in scope

and lacking in terms of political vision of empowerment but was also riddled with the potential danger of diluting and vitiating women's cause via romanticising culture. During 1980s, however, realising the limitations of "anthropology of women" genre the feminist ethnographers turned radical exhibiting more theoretical rigour and a clear political vision reflected in its action based approach (Moore, 1988: 186-198; Ortner, 1994: 393). The present paper dwells upon this journey of feminist anthropology from remedial to radical and delineates the way it claims to be radical. The radical agenda of feminist anthropology is three pronged: calling into question the works of its own "sisterhood", developing a critique of "mainstream" anthropology and unmasking the so called post-modern turn in ethnography. Feminist anthropologists ask as to why mainstream anthropology has been so recalcitrant in acknowledging that gender sensitivity makes a difference to ethnography?² At the same time, they highlight the limitations of their own "sisterhood" for falling into the logical trap which would lead to romanticisation of culture and trivialization of whole issue of women's empowerment.

FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY AS SELF CRITIQUE

This section of the article reflects upon the difference between the earlier genre called "anthropology of women" and the later genre termed as "feminist anthropology" and tries to demonstrate as to how the latter is a march ahead vis-a-vis the former.

"Anthropology of women" during 1970s and before was basically involved in counter arguments (Oakley, 1991: 3-5). While male ethnographers viewed Australian aboriginal women as profane, economically insignificant and

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excluded from rituals, the female researchers described women's central role in subsistence.³ While Malinowski has claimed that in Australian aboriginal society the 'relation of husband to wife in economic aspect is that of master to slave', the other male anthropologists labelled them as beasts of burden, and, therefore, unlike white women (Malinowski, 1940: 268; Oakley, 1991: 5). Release of women from manual labour and all external production was supposedly, ideal from western male perspective and this presumption probably led to conceptualise aboriginal women as 'beast of burden'.⁴ To the contrary, women anthropologists tried to seize upon these examples as a counter to the universalising of women's physiological weakness.

They went on to document women's importance in culture and production processes e.g., their labour in gathering food, child care, domestic production, their participation in few rites controlled by men and their won separate ceremonies etc. (Oakley, *ibid*). In a more recent ethnography on aboriginal women, Diane Bell notes that men's and women's world are subsequently independent of each other in economic and ritual terms and, hence, they are neither 'beasts of burden' nor 'slaves of their husband' (Bell, 1983: 23). The pertinent question which crops up at this juncture is that despite its seemingly significant contribution, what made this genre problematic and why there was a departure around 1980 from the direction in which it was moving? The answer lies in the fact that while trying to fight androcentrism, the 'anthropology of women' slid into the cultural discourse which maintain the subjugation of women by certain idealisation, glorification and mystification. It reaffirms the popular discourse that women also possess and exercise power in their own spheres.⁵ The logical fall out is denial of any change in existing structure.

Henrietta Moore while acknowledging the significant contribution of 'anthropology of women' genre brands it as remedial and makes a distinction between it and feminist anthropology which she calls radical.⁶ 'To Moore, feminist anthropology is not about adding women into discipline but about confronting the conceptual and analytical inadequacies of disciplinary theory. The implicit assumption in 'anthro-

pology of women' genre is that the men and women have separate, specific but equal power basis. And, in more accurate terms this separateness and difference do not necessarily have to imply inferiority and subordination. Kaberry, in her monograph on Australian aboriginal women argued that they were not subservient; their labour in child care, in gathering food and domestic production are seen indispensable; they have rights in land, they participate in few rites controlled by men and have their own ceremonies (Kaberry, 1933: 142-3, 277). Kaberry's account seems to be the classic example of anthropology of women genre which is held problematic in the succeeding ethnography on Australian aboriginal women. Judith Oakley in her study has developed a thorough critique of Kaberry's monograph on Australian aboriginal women (Oakley, 1991: 3-11). To Oakley, aboriginal ethnography also contains many references to male-female relations which are hard to fit in the picture of separate sphere and 'complementarity'. She feels the need to re-examine aboriginal women's potential control of society's surplus and total demands on their labour vis-à-vis the menfolk. Some of the points which Oakley raises in her thought-provoking article are worthy of mention:

"First, the food from gathering (women's job) was invariably consumed within the domestic unit. By contrast, meat was distributed as prestigious surplus by men beyond the domestic unit and thus created and strengthened the political power."

"Secondly, the gender division of labour was asymmetrical; women had to do a double shift. Along with gathering women were responsible for major task of domestic production, fetching wood and water, tending the hearth, cooking and child rearing. Without the duties of domestic labour, men were freed for the time and flexibility required for extradomestic political activities."

"Thirdly, Kaberry's defensive argument that men's hunting was more physically strenuous is vitiated by the fact that gathering demanded sustained effort and, together with domestic production was more time consuming. Kaberry unwittingly draws on the stereotypes and rocentric view that short bursts of physical

strength are more valuable than sustained physical stamina. Where as women's ceremonies documented by Kaberry are preoccupied with influencing specific male, the major ceremonies for men concerned a generalized identity, their masculinity and entry as adults into society at large. Males are initiated into tribal laws and participate in inter-tribal gathering. By contrast, women are excluded from these ceremonies and knowledge imparted. Here there is an asymmetry."

Oakley finds a veiled irony in Kaberry's observation that mourning ceremonies held when a woman dies are one of the few occasions when a woman albeit a dead one, is the object for an inter-tribal meeting (Oakley, *ibid*: 6) Ann Whitehead contends that whatever the nature of economic system described in terms of nature of its production and exchange relations, women's capacity to act as fully acting subjects in relation to objects or aspect of person which may be treated as objects (rights in people) is always more circumscribed than that of men (Whitehead, 1984: 180). It is her further contention that in any general sense it is kinship or family system which serves to construct women as less able to act as subjects than male subjects do.⁷

FEMINISM AND THE MAINSTREAM ANTHROPOLOGY

Feminist anthropology has many things to share with mainstream anthropology. A rethinking has occurred in the (core) discipline and the culture - its key subject has been problematized against the backdrop of new understanding of power and history with the influx of Foucauldian notion of "discourse" and Gramscian notion of "hegemony" (Ortner, 1994: 373; Ahmed and Shore, 1995: 52). Earlier, culture was conceptualised as shared, now it (shared) has been replaced by the term constitutive; the emphasis is to gauge the degree to which culture is grounded in unequal relation and differently related to people and groups in different social positions (Ortner, *ibid*). Feminist anthropology has always been appreciative of these significant advances made in the anthropology but it has also developed in response to many insufficiencies and absence in disciplinary theorizing and practice (Moore, 1983: 19; Strathern, 1987:

276). Mainstream anthropology does take into consideration the differences in human social life based on gender, class, race, culture and history-but fails to perceive the inter-relations between them. To the contrary, feminist anthropology conceptualise the differences based on gender, class, race, culture and history- in a more holistic fashion. Moore writes:

"If we establish the apriori dominance or significance of one particular form of difference in our theoretical frameworks, then we automatically run the risk of ignoring others. I do not think that we can necessarily establish the primacy of one form of difference over others.... If we take the example of gender, then logically, there can be no way of experiencing gender difference in some moment prior to the experience of other forms of differences. To be a black woman means to be woman and a black, but the experience of these forms of differences is simultaneous and not sequential or consequential" (1988: 196).

So, the richness of feminist anthropology lies in inter-relating the issues of gender, class, race, history and providing a more balanced understanding of reality.

Post-Modern Turn and the Feminist Apprehensions

The more recent ethnographies which apply gender - sensitive approach get the theoretical boost from the present day feminist discourse; the discourse (feminist) of present day is marked by its dismantling practices both of self and other parallel discourses, cultural, academic or otherwise which intends to put a gloss over hierarchies and power (Bhasin and Khan; 1987: 2-3). In an article published in *Signs*, the feminist journal, entitled "The Post-modern Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective" the authors Mascia Lees et. al., have reacted sharply against the authors of *Writing Culture*⁸ (Less et al., 1989: 7-33). They not only develop a radical critique of *Writing Culture*'s claim of self-reflexivity but also repudiate the politics which underlies this post-modernist discourse. The thrust of their argument lies on the post-modern focus in "style and form", which directs our attention away from the fact that ethnography is more than "writing it up". There may be a considerable overlap between post-modernism

and feminism eg. both are sceptical about the belief concerning truth, knowledge, power, self and language, but feminist theory differs from post-modernism in the sense that it acknowledges it grounding in politics (ibid: 8).

Marilyn Strathern (1986) compares and contrasts the Post-modernist ethnographic style with that of Feminist anthropology. She observes :

"Much feminist discourse is constructed in a plural way, arguments are juxtaposed, many voices solicited —. There are no central texts, no definitive techniques. Unlike post modern writings, however, which makes its structuring oppositions under a myth of jumble, feminist scholarship has a special set of interest: feminists argue with one another in many voices but they also know themselves as an interest group" (Strathern, 1986: 268).

Political scientist Nancy Hartsock finds curious the post-modern claim that verbal constructs do not correspond to reality.⁹ She argues that, it has arisen precisely when women and non-western people have begun to speak for themselves and indeed to speak about global system of power-differentials.¹⁰ Similarly, Sandra Harding claims that "historically relativism appears as an intellectual possibility and a problem only for dominating groups at the point where hegemony (the universality) of their views, is being challenged"; (Relativism) is fundamentally a sexist response that attempts to preserve the legitimacy of androcentric claims in the face of contrary evidence".¹¹ She expresses the fear that the new ethnography may help to preserve the dominant colonial and neo-colonial relations from which anthropology and particularly the new ethnography is trying to extricate itself.

The new ethnography draws on post-modern epistemology to accomplish its political ends, but much feminism derieves its theory from practice based on material conditions of human life (Lees et.al., 1989: 23). Action approach provides backdrop against which culture has been problematized by feminist anthropologists with a complete new sets of questions and agendas.¹² The element of materiality is the touchstone for this approach; material conditions, resources, possible means of producing and their distribution are basic premises which inform most of

the feminist enquiry. The more 'culturally' oriented approach termed as emic view which has informed the mainstream anthropology (particularly in the context of gender) has become redundant and the etic view which concerns the material production and reproduction and the ideology that further it has been embraced by feminists, in order to overcome the separation between "cultural" and "political" (Clark, 1993: 7). A genre of feminist ethnography has also come up in India. One can gauge this phenomenon in the works of Leela Dube, Rajni Palriwala, Bina Agrawal, Tiplut Nongbri, Urshula Sharma and a host of others.¹³ But there is need for complementing ethnographic studies based on these insights and their translation into practice/action. Another question which can be posed in the end is that why only women do a gender - sensitive ethnography? Male ethnographers can also make use of these insights poured in, by feminist ethnographers and produce a balanced understanding of the social realities.

NOTES

1. The most outstanding compilation of this genre is Rayna R. Reiter's, 'Towards an Anthropology of women'. See Reiter, 1975.
2. How gender-sensitivity makes a difference to ethnography has been described very lucidly by James R. Gregory. In the beginning paragraphs Gregory notes that his field work in Southern Belize has primarily focused on male roles. But once he got the opportunity to teach a course on "Sex-role and culture". A self realisation came to him about gender - blindness in his ethnographic data. This, as Gregory proclaims led him to see many of the un-noticed things as crucial. See Gregory, 1994: 316-327.
3. Rohrilich Leavitt et. al. have analysed the different interpretations given by male and female ethnographers about the position of Australian aboriginal women. See, Rohrilich Leavitt et al., 1975: 110-26.
4. Parallel ideology has been prevalent in the context of caste in India. Beteille's essay on "Race, Caste and Gender" provides an interesting reading where he draws a parallel between race and caste in relation to gender. See, Beteille, 1991: 1-14.
5. This has been brought out in a very articulative essay by Michelle Perrot. See, Perrot, 1988.
6. To Moore, "anthropology of women" was the precursor to "feminist anthropology". It was

very successful in bringing women 'back into view' in the discipline. But in doing so it was more remedial than radical. She reiterates that just as many feminists found that goals of women's movement could not be fulfilled by "add women and stir method". So women studies scholars discovered that academic field could not be cured from sexism simply by accretion. See, Moore, 1986: 6.

7. Whitehead illustrates this fact by her study of Kusasi of North East Ghana, who are sedentary hoe agriculturist with a formerly leaderless organisation. Agriculture is largely unmechanised. The characteristics of these societies are such that both women and men have an important productive role but the rights to communal property are rarely if ever the same, often because the way in which the outcomes of critical options at marriage (residence, ritual status, group membership) has to affect men and women differently. Hence, Whitehead challenged the notion of equivalence between genders in technologically simple societies by empirical observations. The meaning of land use right (property ownership) has to be interpreted carefully in a technologically poor developed agriculture in which human labor is the most important transforming input. Right to land is more or less meaningless without the labor power to work on it. In course of farming cycle Kusasi farmers makes extensive use of the work of household members and they exchange labor parties within the community. Whitehead's study of sixty households showed that use of exchange labor was particularly unequal. In terms of gender, the net effect is that it is difficult for a Kusasi woman to command the labor of social superiors, either within immediate polygamous family unit or within a set of neighbouring agnatically related households. They rely on very junior men, often boys. Equally significant is the way Kusasi conceptualise the land ownership. According to Kusasi conceptualisation, land ownership is equivalent to the ownership of crop produced on it. But, due to gender ideology in-built into Kusasi culture, women grow groundnuts "for children to chop (eat), men grow groundnuts for cash" (Whitehead, 1984: 180-85).
8. "Writing Culture" by Clifford and Marcuse is claimed by its authors as a departure from the conventional ethnographic style and supposed to be a major breakthrough in the ethnographic exercise where the authors talk about a "new" ethnography which would be based on multiple authorship of anthropological texts, and

which would represent the interlocutory process of field work, and the collaboration between anthropologists and informants on which the practice of anthropology will be based. The book has been written in a post-modernist framework emphasizing relativism and natives' participation in writing culture (see, Clifford and Marcuse, 1986, introduction of the book).

9. Hartsock, quoted in Less et al., 1989: 15
10. Ibid
11. Sandra Harding, quoted in, Less et al., 1989: 18
12. Most practice anthropologists to date take the individual actors eg. Marjari Shostak's Nisa, or units of various types eg. "women", "commoners", "workers", "junior siblings", etc. The analyst take these people and their doings as the reference point for understanding particular unfolding of events, and processes in reproduction or change in some structural features. See, Ortner, 1994: 372.
13. See, Dube, 1986, 1996; Agrawal, 1994; Nongbri, 1994; Palriwala, 1996; Sharma, 1980, 1986.

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