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## **GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS: A STUDY ON FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY**

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### **Abstract**

The epistemology which we went through up to 1970's has hardly been gender-sensitive, and with the emergence of feminism, mainly with its Second Wave, a group of gender-sensitive practitioners of epistemology and feminist philosophy came out to declare that our so far cultivated epistemology (which is sometimes regarded as "pure" and "standard") has subtly been infected with viruses of patriarchal ideology and androcentrism. Taking this gender dimension in mind, there has developed a considerable amount of literature, which is referred to as feminist epistemology. It is actually doing epistemology in order to assure cognitive justice to all, and thereby establish gender-sensitive humanism, cleansing it from traditional androcentric biases and unjust patriarchal surveillance. This present article

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is a critical study of this feminist epistemology, where I shall be dwelling upon the epistemological roots of gender discrimination.

**Keywords:** sex, gender, sexism, epistemology, patriarchy, phallogocentrism, androcentrism

Whenever someone raises an issue of gender discrimination in a philosophical discussion or interview, a large number of professors and scholars retort: it may be a topic of sociology or political science, why do you put it into philosophical discourse? This article of mine is an answer, though partially, to that type of questions. Gender discrimination and associated feminist issues are philosophical issue, and we may verily speak of feminist philosophy, consisting of feminist ontology, feminist epistemology, feminist methodology, feminist ethics, feminist logic, etc. Here I like to dwell only upon the epistemological roots of gender discrimination, and as such it is a study on feminist epistemology.

Traditional normative epistemology (sometimes regarded as ‘pure’ and ‘standard’) has hardly been gender-sensitive. But, with the emergence of feminism, mainly in its Second Wave, a group of gender-sensitive practitioners of epistemology and feminist philosophy made it clear that our so-far cultivated epistemology is deeply infected with phallogocentrism (i.e., the sustaining conceptual and theoretical layer of misogyny in its deeper level) and androcentricism (i.e., the viewpoint based on a masculine way of seeing things, distorting/omitting women’s lived experiences). Doing epistemology—taking this gender dimension in cognizance—is referred to as the feminist epistemology.

It is often claimed that the whole of human culture is gendered and mostly biased against women, and as such a different conceptual, ideological and epistemological perspective should be developed that can seriously take such distortions and injustice into task. In particular, while we endeavour to explore some arena of women’s world, the very first thing we should keep in mind is that women have not been “situated” at par with men in our societies. And as

such, the so called neutral perspectives or methods, or the ideal and pure concepts or theories, traditionally devised mostly under the spell of phallogocentrism and androcentricism, cannot take us to the required level of cognitive justice and gender equality. In this context we may refer to Audre Lorde who iterated in 1979 in an international conference on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house!" All these, in turn, mean, any explorations on women's issues to be meaningful and genuine should develop new conceptual and theoretical tools and follow a gender-sensitive methodology that can truly dismantle the layers of patriarchy, phallogocentrism and androcentricism, and thus can lead us to the goal of gender justice.

### **Ideology of Feminism**

Before entering directly into feminist epistemology as such, let us take a halt to understand what feminism (which endeavours to explore all modes of gender discrimination in order to overcome them) really means (as many people, including so called highly educated ones, often misunderstand this view-point.). We use the term '*feminism*' often, but its meaning and significance is not always clear, not even to those who often use it. Some people consider the label "feminist" as a badge of pride, while others try to avoid it at any cost. Following Patricia Maguire, we may here say that feminism is, firstly, an ideology, an world-view, that takes this central belief that women have been facing some typical form of oppression, humiliation or exploitation almost from the beginning of human civilization all over the globe. Secondly, it is a pledge, a promise to explore and understand its causes and roots of its sustenance for such a long, long period, and thirdly, a commitment to work individually and collectively in every walk of life in order to end such oppression in all its forms. (Maguire, 1987: 79). But, side by side, it should also be understood that feminism is not any chauvinistic belief that women are superior to males, nor does it support misandry (viz. hating menfolk) or matriarchy. To say the truth, it is an ideology based on the conviction that women suffer systematic injustice just

because of their sex, just because they are born as females with some specific genitals. And a feminist is any person who believes in full and concrete equality between men and women. Thus any human being—male or female, or eunuch or a bi-sexual— who supports this ideology in thought and action can be a feminist. Following Alison Jaggar (1992), we may put here the following points to reflect upon:

a) Our traditional domain of knowledge has cared little for women's interests, rights and identity in comparison to their male counterparts.

b) Traditional knowledge and life-view has not given due attention to the problems, which arise in the so-called private sphere, e.g., in which most of women cook, clean, and care for the young, the old and the sick. Side by side, it affirms that the issues in the public sphere (male-dominated domain of social production) are only important.

c) Most damagingly, it supposes that, while men are free moral agents, women are not adequately developed as autonomous moral agents. That means, a woman, under this supposition, cannot act voluntarily and responsibly as an individual person.

d) Traditional knowledge-creation gives more importance up on the so called masculine traits, likerationality, autonomy, transcendence, etc., and up on masculine ways of reasoning that emphasizes more on rules, universality, impartiality, etc. while being critical of feminine traits, like emotion, interdependence, and immanence, etc. and feminine ways of thinking that emphasizes on interrelationships, particularity, and sometimes, even partiality.

Anyhow, in order to explore the nature of such a systematic injustice against women, we must take note of at least two distinctions, first between *sex and gender*, and among different *levels of misogyny* (women-hating).

As we know, sex is mostly a biological category, determined primarily by sex organs we are born with, and secondarily by

accompanying sexual and reproductive functions, and also by some differences in our behaviour-patterns. Gender, on the other hand, is mostly a cultural category, constructed and determined by social and religious codes and customs, and separate role prescriptions we are supposed to go on following. While sex is thus a natural endowment, where we have very little option to choose, the cultural category of gender is completely man-made. It is actually a socially constructed structure or a lens through which we see ourselves and others. This gender is what we can deconstruct and reconstruct anew. And feminist philosophy, including its epistemology, is dedicated to this ardent task. (It may simultaneously be noted that contemporary feminists hold that even sex and sexual preferences are also socially-constructed, at least to some extent!)

Another important distinction is very much needed to make, and it is about different layers of disregarding and humiliating women. We can distinguish among: *Sexism, Patriarchy and Phallogocentrism*. Sexism is what we find in males' overt behaviours, like teasing, scolding, beating, raping women (and in some rare cases, in females' attitude and behaviour to males). What we see, feel and do to the womenfolk traditionally (or to persons of opposite sex) are instances of sexism. It is interesting to note here that such humiliations and atrocities go on happening almost every day, here and there—and almost in the same way: women get victimized! This leads us to think that there must be some support-base of misogyny: if there were no support-base, can these inhumanities sustain from the days of Hypatia (the neo-platonist Greek Philosopher and mathematician, born c. 350–370; died 415 AD) to 78% rise in atrocities on women in Haryana (India) as on 4th March, 2020! And the socio-political system that indirectly supports such humiliations happening almost in the same direction--women are raped, harassed, exploited and victimized—is called patriarchy. To say, all these get support directly or indirectly from patriarchy, and this is identified as the second level of misogyny. Patriarchy is abstract but very powerful. It may be understood as the systematic and institutional structure of social and religious customs, practices,

etc. with male supremacy, with power and control of women's domestic, re-productive and productive activities. This dominating and misogynist structure acquires its strength from different types of familial, social and religious codes, rituals and customs and different institutions. And this patriarchy goes die-hard. Why? Because there is still another deeper support-base, and this third and the deepest level of misogyny is called phallogocentrism: the discrimination against women at the conceptual, theoretical, and ideological levels. Concepts, ideology, theories, language, etc. too are often seen to be infected with male glorification and female humiliation. Phallogocentrism is, in fact, a discursive series of concepts, themes and processes founded on androcentric reason as against feminine intuition. Although the Greek word 'logos' is variously translated: as 'word', 'speech', 'knowledge', 'account', or as 'reason', here it means misogynist way of understanding and reasoning. And "phallus" denotes the symbolic function the penis takes on in language, fantasy and subject constitution. On this interpretation 'phallogocentrism' (or more slimly, 'phallogocentrism') refers to the hierarchical organisation of sexual differences in and by a patriarchal imaginary and symbolic form in which the male takes the centre-stage.

As man of philosophy, I am much interested in this inner-most level of misogyny identified as phallogocentrism. Our ethnic cultures, literatures, religions, and even philosophy, are seen to be infected with this. Let us consider some examples from philosophy: Aristotle held that the courage of a man lies in commanding, a woman's lies in obeying. Raising the binary of form and matter he avers that as matter waits for form, so the female for the male. He goes that far to say that a female is an incomplete male or "as it were, a deformity", which contributes only matter and not form to the generation of offspring, and concludes that "a woman is perhaps an inferior being" (*Politics*: 1254b13–14) And, in the modern era, we find our great Enlightenment-champion Immanuel Kant who supports feminine essentialism, and is seen to be upholding female's inferiority. Kant writes: "Labourious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman

should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merit that are proper to her sex and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration but, at the same time, they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex.” (Kant, 1960:79) He goes on to assert very despoiling proposition: “Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense.” (*ibid.*) He is hesitant to believe that the females also can follow principles. (*ibid.* p. 79) With an intention to justify their subordination to their male-counterparts he says, “As culture advances, each party must be superior in his own particular way; the man must be superior to the woman by his physical strength and courage; the woman to the man, however, by her natural talent for gaining mastery over his desire for her.” (Kant 174: 167). Kant expresses his belief that women cannot personally defend her own rights in civil affairs for herself. (Kant, 1974:79) Almost in the same vein, Hegel also appears to be misogynist who women are not capable of managing those performances which require “a universal faculty.” Hence they cannot tackle “advanced sciences, philosophy and certain forms of artistic production”. As they are regulated by arbitrary inclinations and opinions, so fail to control their behaviour following “the demands of universality, but by.” (Hegel 1973: 263) And Shankaracharya iterates: “Woman is the door to hell!” (It is sometimes retorted that Shankaracharya says this keeping in mind for sages and saints who has opted for ultimate salvation! But can this hide his androcentric world-view and his misogyny?)

### **Feminist Critique of the Enlightenment Epistemology**

As we have hinted in the introduction, feminist epistemology traces androcentric bias of the Enlightenment epistemology that speaks of the “ideal” knower as a disinterested but autonomous human being who is committed in discovering some objective, universal truths by using the reasoning process. And curiously, this knower is said to keep himself detached from all emotions, bodily needs, most of which are traditionally considered to be associated with femininity. But this Enlightenment epistemology is almost universally accepted as the “standard” epistemology.

A deeper reflection shows that such an epistemology shows womenfolk as inferior to men as knower, and, as such, the feminists seriously take this approach as very objectionable. This is problematic as it has serious sexist implications, and it is thus very misleading too. The feminists do admit that too much emotional bonding may distort our understanding, but it is equally important to note that in many other circumstances emotional attachments may enhance our understanding and thus may verily improve the quality of our knowledge.

This mainstream ‘standard’ epistemology has actually alienated the knowers from one another and from the particularities of space, time and circumstances in real-life affairs, and this separation might very well lead to harmful consequences for epistemology and social justice. The feminists, on the other hand, come out to demonstrate the socio-political nature of epistemology. They put emphasis on how the knowledge-related practices place individuals in relationships of interdependence. Since female-folk are mostly dependent on men (who are traditionally been represented as independent and autonomous), and are historically assigned the responsibility of giving care and maintaining relationship that emphasizes mutual dependence, the approach of this so called “standard” epistemology miserably fails to accord due epistemic value in these feminine attributes, capabilities or skills. Such an epistemology developed unnecessary binaries of subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, and the like in absolutistic terms. It overvalues reason and devalues emotion and the complexities of a situation. Since the Enlightenment era, it has been the dominant epistemology in Western philosophy and science. The feminists see this so called standard epistemology androcentric and male-biased, which seriously fails to take cognisance of women’s cognitive power, lived experiences and specific style of thinking. Due to long standing patriarchal dominance, male-devised androcentric norms get developed as standard norms, and these have been regarded as objective and universally acceptable to all humans. The feminists vehemently oppose this stance, which represents women’s ways of thinking and knowing inferior and undependable.

Another important aspect which the feminists endeavour to focus is the deeper social responsibility embedded in any epistemic agency that epistemic individualism of the Enlightenment epistemology often ignores. This includes the responsibility to accurately representing one's epistemic competence and weaknesses to others and to formulate and implement inclusive knowing practices which will also be specifically responsive to the needs and choices of the affected groups. Lorraine Code in her *Ecological Thinking* puts forward this responsibility for responsiveness to all vulnerable aspects of the natural world, thereby comes to institute knowing practices and cognitive culture in such a way that they can promote social harmony and global wellbeing. Ecofeminism has clearly demonstrated how nearer women are to mother-nature. Obviously, all these reflect responsible applications of our cognitive resources and epistemology. And today we have come to speak of feminist environmental epistemology.

Needless to say, all such moves deviate from the standards set by the androcentric ideology, and so these are called "non-ideal", "non-standard" and the like. As we see, such an ideal theory is engaged in exploring how an autonomous individual agent should act under pre-determined standard situations, a non-ideal epistemology is eager to understand how things really are, and then to discover how an agent ought to behave in a specific real-life situations. Feminist epistemology, as a matter-of-fact, starts from first focussing on the mode of being of things, identifies the injustices involved and then suggest how ought we to behave as knowing agents to change those specific unjust circumstances into circumstances that would make inclusive knowing practices possible and thus advance knowledge in the right direction. Needless to say, such knowledges will equitably promote wellbeing for the whole of humanity (for the males, the females, for the young, for the old, for the lower castes, the lesbians, the gays, and so on).

To keep in mind, this methodology does not altogether deny the efficacy different standards or ideal theories prevalent in scientific enquiries, but it keeps a suspecting eye on any so called

ideal theory, lest that promotes a hidden agenda. It does never fail to interrogate. If we speak of “the ideal”, then we also have to think: ideal, according to whom, for whom? whose interests that serves? A patient deep reflection would show that there are inherent in these idealities typically insensitive and unjust perspectives of power and privileges. The feminists are committed to contest such insensitivities and injustice in knowledge domain.

In fine, the feminist writers and supporters of feminist epistemology argue that patriarchal knowledge practices have so far disadvantaged women by (i) excluding them from the domain of knowledge, from inquiry, from educational institutions for a long, long period; (ii) denying them epistemic authority, women’s self-acquired knowledge and testimony has been ignored, even by the philosophers [Kant, for example, argues that a woman cannot directly carry on her defence her rights in court, can do only but only through some representative. (Kant, 1974:80)], (iii) devaluating woman’s cognitive styles as inferior, (iv) developing theories about women that represent them as deviant, or important only when serve patriarchal interests, (v) arranging concepts or theories of social realities that render women’s performances and interests invisible, and (vi) creating ideology, science and technology unfavourable to humans in subordinate positions, even reinforces different types of hierarchies.

The feminist thinkers come to this understanding that such insensitivities and failures are due to some mistaken conceptions of the cognitive domain. They supply some conceptual tools and different accounts of how we can transcend such failures and insensitivities. First, they also endeavour to demonstrate the concrete effects of entry of women and feminist thinkers into academic disciplines. They have especially speak of the female students and scholars of biology and the social sciences, who produce new concepts, theories, and methods. Secondly, these critics of so called standard epistemology have also attempted to explain how gender and feminist values and point of view play a causal role in these trans-valuations. Thirdly, they develop such theories that would support gender equality. And

finally, they defend these new theorizations as cognitive, not just group discussions.

Anyhow, the basic and central concept of feminist epistemology is that of a 'situated knower', and hence, of situated knowledge. That means, whoever endeavours to cognize something, he/she does it from a particular situation, and as such it is said that knowledge would reflect the particular perspective from which the subject come to know. And the thinkers doing feminist epistemology naturally have special interest in exploring how the gender matrix *situates* the subjects in the process of knowing. Needless to say, this novel approach in epistemology has initiated different types of feminist criticisms of the traditional domains of science and knowledge. At the same time, it has demonstrated the proper roles of social and political values in our diverse areas of inquiry, and helped in reviewing the so called ideals of universality, objectivity and rationality. By implication it has raised serious questions regarding epistemic authority. All these have been articulated into three main approaches: Feminist Standpoint Theory, Feminist Postmodernism, and Feminist Empiricism, to which we now turn in.

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology**

The name itself is suggestive: any praxis that takes the issue of social situatedness of knowers seriously is regarded a Standpoint theory. If we try to relook the world from a particular point of view, we need first to specify its social location and other associated issues. And according to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (cf: Internet edition), any standpoint praxis must take into account all these things: (i) the specific social, economic and political situatedness of the privileged perspective, (ii) the nature and scope of its privileging, (iii) the concrete things of the social location allegedly producing superior cognition, social role and subjective identity in particular; (iv) the base of its privilege; (v) the particular kind of epistemic superiority it claims; (vi) the opposite perspectives if any, relative to which it claims superiority, and finally, (vii) particular ways of access to the perspective. To these we may add: the resolution of

all absolutistic dualisms/exclusive binaries, like nature/culture, etc.

Let us start with this example: the formal training and experience of an auto-mechanic, for example, undoubtedly grounds his/her epistemic privilege, which justifies a claim to greater reliability than the judgments of an ordinary auto-owner. But a Standpoint theory raises a very different issue when someone claims epistemic privilege over socially and politically contested matters. If we look back into the history of thought, we will find that Marxism has offered us the classic model of a standpoint theory. Marxism claims an epistemic privilege of economics, sociology, and history on behalf of the standpoint of the proletariat. The labourers in a capitalist society could not have such a standpoint earlier. They acquire it only by gaining peculiar collective consciousness of their role in a capitalist mode of production the diverse roles they play and their social situations enable them to win over an cognitively privileged standpoint on the society. As we know, any form of capitalism can survive on surplus value, which comes from the capitalist's exploiting some portion of the value the workers produce. Being continuously exploited and oppressed, which is characteristic of any capitalist regime, they earn a special cognitive style based on the material conditions they go on interacting. Such a long-standing desertion and deprivation give them an interest in the truth about whose interests the capitalist mode of production really serves. This realization leads the labourers to enumerate their world in terms of 'use' values, whereas their capitalist masters consider the world only in terms of 'exchange' values. Obviously, the workers' representation is considered more basic, since the fundamental laws of economics and history get integrated in terms of the ongoing struggle over the wrongful appropriation of surplus use value, not in terms of superficial money exchange value.

As we have hinted, the standpoint epistemology which the feminist advances reiterates an epistemic privilege over the nature of gender relations, and of societal phenomena in which gender is

very specifically implicated on behalf of the women. Obviously this cognitive privilege is relative to theories that always try to integrate patriarchy and androcentricity. All such feminist standpoint theories base the claim to epistemic privilege in specific aspects of women's social situatedness. All these can be understood in comparison with different strands of Marxist epistemology.

Let us take the issues one by one. (i) **Centrality of Concern:** As workers are in the central position in any industrial production, so also women are central to the system of reproduction—of giving birth to offspring, socializing children and caring for all the vulnerables. As women are in charge of satisfying the needs of all persons and domestic animals, they are in a better position than menfolk to identify how patriarchy goes against our basic needs, like caring. A man, on the other hand, enjoying a dominant position in a patriarchal society, use his privilege of trifling or undermining the interests of all subordinates, including womenfolk. Thus we find women's better access to first-hand experience and information about whose needs get better served under patriarchy.

(ii) **Objectification and Collectivising Consciousness:** Male domination in a patriarchal society is grounded on sexual objectification. It is a process that involves some sort of epistemic mystification. In any hierarchical set-up the dominant ones project their desires onto the subordinate groups and, by taking advantage of their power, make the subordinates conform to the way the former want them to be. What we call gender is the mode of such objectification perpetuated chiefly by their erotic desires, viz. by representing women as essentially sexually subordinate. But being in a group, a woman can unmask this ideological misrepresentation, and can show how a social group unjustly objectify them. Only when women thus organize themselves, and share first-hand experience, they get power and courage to resist all kinds of sexist representations made of them, through campaigns and movements on different issues. This cognitive privilege and agency give them confidence to overcome patriarchal oppressions.

(iii) **Cognitive Style:** There are some theories which explain the process of development of feminine and masculine traits in our children. In this developmental process of gender-identity male and female children, who are raised by some female caregivers face distinct issues. As per Freudian analysis (which enjoys better acceptance), the male children develop their distinct masculine identities by detaching themselves from their care-givers, who are mostly their biological mothers. This process of separation crucially involves a rejection of the feminine attributes, and the maintenance of a distance from the feminine. But in the case of female children they achieve their gender identity in the reverse process, that is, by identifying themselves with their mothers, and in this process the boundaries between self and other gets obscured. In this process of formation males tend to be self, while the female dwindles in between the self and the other. The most important point to note here is that with this process of gender identity formation males and females achieve distinctive cognitive styles. The cognitive style we find in male children/adolescents is seen to be more abstract, detached, disembodied, more rational and analytical, mostly deductive and quantitative, and this in turn leads them towards the values of control or dominance. On the other hand, the cognitive style of the girls tends to be more concrete, emotionally engaged, synthetical, intuitive, relational, and finally, is oriented toward the values of care.

(iv) **Oppression and Social Representation:** Women are oppressed by the social system of patriarchy and as such, they are eager to represent social phenomena in such a way that would truly reveal this truth of unjustified oppression. This privilege of their direct experience enables them to respond adequately to combat patriarchal tyranny. This epistemology that grounds an epistemic privilege in oppression helps the women identifying this multiplicity of oppression, which, in turn, demonstrates them as epistemically privileged in multiple modes.

(v) **Evidential Injustice:** It is interesting to note that knowing

practices often give privilege to the powerful, give credibility to speakers on the basis of gender, race, body, or power. This in turn erects a kind of epistemic injustice to the underprivileged women, and thus she is wronged in her capacity as knower. Sometimes there are cases of wilful ignorance, viz. a lack of knowledge consciously revoked for domination over women.

(vi) **Contextuality and Situatedness:** As already said, the traditional approach in epistemology has been evasive or ignorant to take into account that knowers have different social backgrounds, different bodies (viz. differently sexed, raced, aged, abled, etc.) and economic situations. As these differences affect us individually in our upbringing and lived experiences, the knowers often get positioned differently in his social and cultural set-up, in some unique positions in the social hierarchy. And this situatedness may create deep differences in our endeavour to know, in setting questions, and understanding an event, drawing some other interpretive resources in order to make sense of their experiences. This also affects in putting trust or respecting others, and also influences our disposition to listen to, and learn from the others. It may here be noted that Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1988: 575-599) first introduced the idea of “situated knower”, which is the main component of Standpoint Epistemology. Accordingly, most knowledge, academic knowledge in particular, is always situated and developed by positioned actors working from different locations. And thus what is known and the ways in which this knowledge is cognized is subject to some situation and perspective—of the knower.

(vii) **Dalit Feminist Standpoint:** It is a feminist perspective that seriously questions caste and gender roles among the Dalit population, which includes all oppressed ethnic groups/castes, like shudra, ati-shudra, outcastes, untouchables in Hindu religious traditions, and some such groups in other religions, living particularly in South Asia, mainly in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. If we consider the horrific rape case of Manisha Valmiki (cf: <https://wikibio.in/hathras-gang-rape-case>) in the Boolagarhi

village of Hathras in Uttar Pradesh (India) in September 14, 2020 and its aftermath, we will find the logic of such a dalit standpoint epistemology. The resultant movements of the so called upper classes and the administration was inhuman and casteist.

(viii) **Intersectionality:** The incident just referred to, additionally, reflects the intersectionality of knowledge-situation. As we know, intersectionality is a systematic epistemology, or better to say research methodology, that originated from early 1980's feminist activism in the United States that is used by present-day feminists as a tool to examine oppressions caused by the mediated interactions between different social factors, including social inequality, power, gender, race, population-size, and so on. Also, it is rewarding to take note of some other modalities of situatedness and contextuality as follows:

(a) **Embodiment:** We all get in touch with the world around through our own bodies, which have different constitutions and are located in various space and time. The important thing is that such variation of being in different positions significantly affects us as individuals. Let me illustrate with an example: I am standing before the concrete white structure of the Taj Mahal. Because of different physical locations, I, who is standing just before the monument, observe that structure very differently than one who is standing at some distance on the other side of Yamuna.

(b) **First-Person point of view versus Third-Person point of view:** It is not difficult to understand that people who perceive something directly, which we call first-person access, have privilege over some third person's account of the same. And we often speak of own bodily and mental states as yielding us direct knowledge of them. Other persons may know such states and processes only by interpreting some external signs, etc. Needless to say, this third-person knowledge is verily distinct in character from that of the first person.

(c) **Emotionalities:** In the process of acquiring knowledge, our own emotions, attitude and sentiments play an important role.

Some object of knowledge is appreciated by the knower in relation to his emotion, attitude and interest. To illustrate, a thief may find a lock on some gate as a baffling hurdle, while the concerned house-owner sees in it a means of soothing sleep.

**(d) Personal Knowledge of Others:** Though the term ‘knowledge’ signifies something impersonal, something objective, our knowledge of others sometimes depends on our personal relationships with them. This type of personal knowledge regarding other persons may not be completely articulated. Still this intuitive understanding of the others plays a very important in our private and public domains.

**(e) Knowing by Performance:** Though ‘knowing that’ mode of knowledge gets more prominence in epistemology, there is another mode of ‘knowing how’ which is demonstrated by performance on the part of the claimant of knowledge. We find many skills in many people: I can teach logic better, while a mechanic can repair an android phone set very quickly. This knowing by performance becomes much more important in private domain. The feminists rightly point out that women’s distinctive and special skills in domestic and private spheres give them an important epistemic privilege over the males in many matters.

**(f) Background Ideologies:** The ideological beliefs we espouse play another important role in our epistemic behaviour. We often interpret whatever we see, we experience on the basis of our personal and ethnic beliefs and ideologies. Although we are expected to separate knowledge from these faiths and beliefs, still in reality our background beliefs play an important part in our cognitions. We differ in our metaphysical assumptions, viz. either accept physicalism or spiritualism. In political ideology I may believe in Nozick’s libertarianism, and denounce Marxism. My friend may be a staunch believer in Marxist or Socialist democracy liberalism. My aunt always favours patriarchy, while my wife is a committed feminist. This variation in background ideologies also influence our knowing.

**(g) Gender Roles:** Our society assigns specifically distinct social roles for males and for females. Following this line of role-prescription, most societies appoint political and military offices mostly from the males, while assign women mostly child-rearing and other domestic responsibilities, like cleaning, caring and cooking. Although a lady teacher may be successful in her duty, still her gender role gives her an edge better than her husband in the kitchen.

**(h) Gender Norms:** Traditional society prescribes different norms for men and women in family matters and also in the public domain. Women are expected to follow different norms of behaviour and movements from that of their male counterparts. We teach our male children to be assertive, while saying my daughter to be submissive. Standpoint epistemology informs us that even this difference in norms may add significant difference in our acquisition of knowledge.

**(i) Gender Identity:** One individual's gender identity ascribed by the society may not go along with his or her own choice of gender identity. As a different subject I may choose any one of these identities: like to consider myself as a male, as a female, both or neither. For example, my friend Sunrit Agarwal personally likes to see him as a member of gay community, while denying all other identities. One may now-a-days like to keep one's identity secret, too!

### **A Critical Note on Standpoint Theory**

It may be kept in mind that this feminist standpoint theory is a version of Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school, from Adorno to Habermas. And, as we know, the advocates of critical theory go by the aim to empower those who are oppressed, who are kept 'weak'. But some critics, like Longino, argue that standpoint theory cannot erect a non-circular basis for deciding which standpoint has epistemic privilege over others. Another thinker Reuven Bar On contests the proposal of basing women's epistemic privilege via such cognitive style. He contends, referring to the feminine ethics of Care (that is claimed to provide women some epistemic privilege

on moral issues), that our access to ethical knowledge is based on the perpetuation of traditional gender relations. Hence, the attempt to base epistemic privilege on some cognitive styles leads us in the long run to a choice between having genuine moral knowledge and living in a gender-sensitive society. Hence we should be very careful while proceeding along lines of standpoint theories.

### **Feminist Postmodernism**

Let us start with some basic themes of Postmodernism. It is a significant intellectual movement based primarily on a variety of poststructuralist thoughts. It goes with a sceptical sensibility against the so called modernist ideas and principles of universality, objectivity, rationality, a singular truth, etc. Postmodernism emphasizes instead on the situatedness, contingency, instability, ambiguity and essential contestability of any metanarrative. On the politically plain, the supporters of such a thought emphasize making explicit the situatedness and contestability of any integrated system of thought so that they can serve both critical and liberatory functions. Postmodernism goes against any attempt to legitimize any logic of domination and exclusion, and, at the same time, makes room for alternative possibilities, which get obscured by any absolutist claim. For illustration, let us consider some of its most important themes:

**(i) Critique of Reason and Rationality:** Traditionally we have been taking reason as independent, neutral, and the final court of appeal of all our conflicts and confusions. But, according to postmodernism, reason is not so neutral and independent human essence, which we simply take to be. It is, like many other things of the space-time-bound world, symbolically, metaphorically constituted all through the ages of human civilization. Its connection with patriarchal masculinity prepares a rational domain that often stands against being easily accessible, to people whose traits and attributes do not catch up with those components by which ideal masculinity has traditionally been articulated. The feminists abandon any such idealized accounts of what abstract knowers should do, and attempt, instead, to ground their normative conclusions in the

epistemic demand that real, embodied, specifically located knowers face in their attempt to generate responsible and reliable knowledge that can serve them well in the real life situations.

Anyhow, feminism deploys such postmodernist ideas against any theorizations that ultimately come out to justify sexist practices so far, sometimes directly, often indirectly. In particular, it remains against those theories and ideologies which explain the observed distinctions between males and females to be natural, or preach that women have an essence that explains and justifies their subordinate position to the first sex males. Rather taking such clues from postmodernism, they uphold the view that gender is indeed socially and culturally developed; it is actually effects of the long process of social practices and systems of meaning. But we can reconstruct gender anew, if we like.

However, postmodernism has figured more prominently in internal critiques of feminist theories. Women of colour and some communities in the third gender categories have raised the issue of overlooking their specific circumstance and problems therein. Feminist postmodernism thus comes up here both as a vehicle for, and as a response to external and internal criticisms. Beside critiquing the concept of woman, it proposes changing of perspective as a strategy [elaborated below, see point no. (iii)] for negotiating various ideas and theories we find in epistemology about differently situated women.

**(ii) Critiquing the Concept “Woman”:** The feminists under the umbrella of postmodernism have endeavoured to expose the essentialism embedded in many feminist concepts, norms and theories on women’s issues. Any theory that dedicates itself in finding some universal, ahistorical, necessary components in gender identity is called essentialism. This essentialism is objectionable and it is for this that in asserting that gender identity is something fixed, unchanging. Such a move in turn converts socially admitted facts into norms and distinction into deviance. And as a result, it either expels the women who fail to conform to these norms of true “women”, or else it represents them as inferior and abnormal. Some critiques

of feminist theories now-a-days look at the category “woman” by highlighting the intersectionality of identities of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. And this opens up the space for the third gender.

A feminist can arrive at two lessons from here. First, any universal claim about women, gender, and patriarchy should not be accepted dogmatically. Secondly, the standpoint theory’s project of finding a single epistemically privileged perspective is basically wrong.

**(iii) Perspective Shifting and Relativism:** Feminist postmodernism thus views the issue of epistemic position in terms of multiplicity of perspectives, none of which can claim absolute objectivity. For a very obvious reason, such an account is often considered as relativism. Donna Haraway (1991), however, has responded by saying that it rejects both objectivism and relativism. She criticizes by saying that in this way they let knowers get rid of the responsibility for the pictures they put up. To claim objectivity for a representation is to claim that the circumstance forced one to represent objects in such a way. But one who raises the issue of relativism here actually likes to claim that one’s identity and her situatedness makes representing things in this way, but her identity thereby does not make inferior to anyone.

It may here be simultaneously noted that the feminists do not outright deny objectivity as such, but attempt just to redefine it. To say the truth, traditional approach has not supplied us any norms or procedures for finding social issues and problems that are shared by all humanity.

Thus we find that accounting diverse perspectives of situated knowledge ultimately falls in two types of epistemic position: One is the admission of responsibility, which counts the personal choices of situation, which have led to the configuring of one’s representations (Haraway 1991). The second is “mobile positioning”: we can see things from many other alternative perspectives. It needs, of course, deeper engagement with the situations, and claims empathy for

the others on the same positions. All these amount to a critical and responsible cognitive practice.

### **A Critical note on Feminist Postmodernism**

If we carry such a post-modernist approach in epistemology to its logical conclusion, we will find that it aims at dissolving all systems, all grounding narratives, thereby resurrecting a possible reign of isolated individualism. And the notion of *mobile positioning* may in turn reinstate the objectivism of the Enlightenment epistemology that the postmodernist has earlier claimed to repudiate. Following Bordo we can say, it is now in the guise of “the view from everywhere” rather than “the view from nowhere” (Bordo 1990). Some critics argue that feminists would do better if they instead outright tended towards the ideals of human rights and autonomy, without celebrating ‘the death of the subject’ (and the rejection of the metanarrative of standardization) in the fragmentation of the self (Benhabib 1995). Despite these difficulties and limitations, postmodernism has still remained a powerful current in feminist epistemology. I think this is due to our admission of a plurality of perspectives and situational differences in knowledge-making.

### **Feminist Empiricism**

Feminist empiricism is another perspective within women’s studies and research. It combines the enquiries and observations of feminism with the research methods of empiricism. As a tradition empiricism is typically associated with positivism. As such, feminist empiricism, too, demands that concepts and theories be objectively proven through verifiable empirical evidence. Side by side, it criticizes traditional empiricism as inadequate as it works within the patriarchal umbrella.

Needless to repeat, the view that our sense-experience provides the source and the test of all knowledge and truth is christened as empiricism in traditional mainstream epistemology. The classical empiricists, including the positivists, hold that the content of our experience can be described in some basic, theory-neutral terms—in

terms of sense-data, for example. Hitting at its so-called neutrality, contemporary philosopher W.V.O. Quine initiates a revolution in empiricism by rejecting this so called neutrality thesis. For Quine, our experience or observation is never value-neutral, but always theory-laden, though in different degrees. It could be recast in some such terms or concepts that are not directly given in our experience, and is potentially subject to revision in the light of further experiences (Quine 1963). And as Quine puts it, such empiricism does not provide us any extra-scientific vindication of natural science. It is simply another project within science, in which we investigate our own practices of inquiry following empirical methods (Quine 1969). If we keep this in mind, then we will understand feminist empiricists are, in fact, the 'daughters of Quine'.

Anyhow, Quine, as we see, maintains a rigid distinction between fact and value. The advocates of feminist empiricism, however, contend that this distinction cannot be adequately maintained within a fully naturalized empiricism. They are deeply engaged in exploring how feminist values (*vis-à-vis* traditional patriarchal values) can rightly inform and improve our empirical investigations. Along with it, they take interest in understanding how scientific methods can be improved in the light of feminist demonstrations of sex-bias in different methods of science. Quine, of course, favours an individualist account of inquiry, and his preference for naturalized epistemology amount to behavioural and neuro-psychological stance. The feminists are, as a matter of fact, concerned with the impact on inquiry of social practices that are related to gender, race, class, etc. Consequently, they take sociology, history, and science more seriously. In general, they advocate for a socialized epistemology, in which inquiry is taken to be mainly a social process, which the so called standard epistemology overlooks.

Anyhow, feminist epistemology too is not without limitations. Its central problematic is sometimes captured in terms of apparent paradoxes, two in number. First, the significant portion of the feminist critique of science and technology is devoted in exposing the androcentric and

sexist biases in it, especially in scientific theories related to the female body, sexuality, and gender identity. Yet, at the same time, the critics elaborate how feminist values may positively inform scientific inquiry. The feminists, however, need to reconcile these conflicting claims. Secondly, most feminist criticisms are intended to demonstrating the influence of social and political factors on scientific studies, studies that are made by the men of science who are influenced by the sexist values of the wider society in which they are brought up and live.

The feminist empiricists contend that there is a key in resolving such paradoxes, and that is to undermine the assumptions: that gender biases and social factors can have an impact on inquiry only by *displacing* the influence of evidence, logic, etc. Moreover, as Antony reminds us, not all biases are epistemically bad (Antony 1993). But, Hundleby (1997), an ardent supporter of standpoint epistemology, criticizes feminist empiricism for overlooking the vital role of feminist political *activity*. In particular, he is speaking of the development of oppositional consciousness, as a superior source of hypotheses and evidence for challenging the sexist and androcentric theories.

### **A Critical Note on Feminist Empiricism**

It may be added here that most advocates of feminist science speak in this vein that scientific inquiries which are informed by feminist values are based on legitimate. They do not contend that feminist sciences should ignore other ways of practicing science, but certainly demand that feminist critique of sciences should be available to all investigators. Obviously, his account of science and technology is pluralistic in nature, and is consistent with the postmodern denouncing of “totalizing narratives.” But it should also be noted that feminist empiricism is more inclined than postmodernists to demonstrate the persistence of pluralism in the social and applied sciences in real terms. What is meant is that science is disunified because our world is so rich and diversified with a multitude of cross-cutting structures, which a single theoretical vocabulary, a single ‘meta-narrative’ can never account

for exhaustively. Different ethnic groups and academic communities take interests in different aspects of the world reality, and as such we should leave them free to follow their interests to reveal different structures of the world-reality (Harding 1998; Longino 2001). The feminist epistemologists, to say the truth, are more concerned with exclusivism, with androcentric biases, rather than objectivity in traditional scientific discourses.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have already recorded my critical reflections on different strands of feminist epistemology. Keeping all those in account, I may now conclude by saying that the standpoints and methodologies we have elaborated above are not to be confused just as a “woman’s standpoint” which would be theirs by virtue of their femaleness, nor are they merely an interchangeable perspectives anyone could occupy just by deciding to do so. It is actually the adherence to an ideologically sensitive position of concrete gender equality, whose parallel aim is to assure cognitive justice and establish genuine humanism, cleansing it from androcentric biases and unjust patriarchal surveillance. At the same time, all these have to be compared with the so-called standard epistemology, when contested, in order to avoid any gross misunderstanding. But while doing this we should be careful of both the absolutism of standard epistemology and the alleged relativism of standpoint epistemology.

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