



Identity Politics and Feminist Praxis

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Abstract

We are all different in multiple ways and have multiple identities. These differences can either separate or bring us together, depending on how we theorize and practice the politics of our differences. Gender is one marker of our social identity. Other identity differences have been used to separate, privilege, exclude, threaten and oppress and gender identity intersects with many of these. This essay outlines the politics of gendered identity and feminist praxis by looking at how identity politics intersects with patriarchy. Acknowledging that even while all feminists support equality and empowerment of women, there are important differences between them on how this can be achieved, the paper seeks to unravel various strands of Feminist thought to analyse how different feminisms have responded to issues around identity.

Author Profile

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The experience of self identification through gender and the symbolic as well as social practices associated with it have been unraveled over time by feminists who deconstructed the distinction between sex which is biological, and gender which is determined by culture.¹ By the 1970s, feminists showed that most social differences are not based on nature and the subordination of women is carried out through social processes. Thus maleness and femaleness and the discriminatory practices associated with this are based on a gendered lens.

Identity politics has been a central concern of feminist theory. The gender aspect of social relations has been deconstructed by feminists - they reveal how all institutions whether it is of class, race, community or state, are based on patriarchal practices that discriminate against women. These practices in turn are based on the patriarchal conception of power as the ability to use force to influence the other.

Feminism, like all political theory is divided along ideological lines as indicated in Table I. Feminist theory has developed in stages or three waves that mark feminist thinking. Beginning first with the understanding of gender identity, feminists then started unmasking how gender is part of power, class relations and institutions. Feminists in later stages showed how gender identity is not trapped in binaries (male/ female) but that alternate sexualities and systems of power are also social issues.

While all feminists support the idea of equality and empowerment for women, there are differences between them regarding how this can be achieved. This difference impacts on their thinking on identity. Liberal feminists have faith in democratic institutions and the market through which women can get equality. This is contrary to socialist and post modernist feminists who link class and patriarchal oppression. The difference between Post modernist feminists and socialists is that the former critique 'modernity' and reject any grand theory or universalism. They focus on women's experience and celebrate differences. All these strands critique the essentialist feminists who reverse the biology theory to state the difference between men and women, arguing for example, that women are essentially peaceful, caring, linked to mother earth. They argue that boys and girls form their identity as two separate moral universes and the sexed body remains a fixed biological background to personality formation. Others reject this is an essentialist argument, since personalities are made through socialization patterns. (See Table I).

¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex: The Woman as Other* (Paris:1949; Translated, London: Penguin, 1974).

Table I

Different Feminisms

Different Feminisms and their central concerns	Views on Identity	Structures to Overcome this difference	Commonalities To All Feminisms
Liberal (advocate equal rights and equal opportunities)	Men and women not different 'by nature' – equal capabilities; do not focus on discriminations based on race, class, etc.	Institutions and women get equal status in institutions	<i>Understanding that women historically occupy a secondary position in the society; gender-based discrimination unjustified.</i>
Marxist (critique class structure and the sexual division of labour)	Identity mediated by class structure; women bear double burden of class and sexual oppression	Class and gender struggles and women be part of process of class liberation and equity process	Resistance to patriarchal structures
Radical (‘patriarchy’ as the root of all systems of oppression)	Identity shaped by ‘sex-gender systems’ and ‘patriarchy’	Power and getting rid of patriarchy and replacing it with feminist ideology	Linking feminist theory to feminist practice
Essentialist Standpoint (emphasise difference rather than equality in women’s experiences; interlink biology and sociology and psychology)	Identity formed through a process of ‘Other’-ing; ‘self’ is either connected (female/relational) or separate (male/disjointed)		Intersectionality with all other progressive movements
Postmodern (critique universalism and celebrate differences, no ‘authentic woman’s voice’, often run the risk of overstating differences to render impossible any common threads)	Resist universal categorisations; identity mediated through class-caste-gender-race-community-culture-religion and various other factors.	Get women’s experience; history and voices in all identity mediated organizations; women have to make a choice in keeping their traditions or changing to modernity	Women’s liberation from all forms of injustice and discrimination

Critical (aims to strike a balance between a universal gender analysis and differences among women's experiences across the world)	-do-; primacy of gender as an analytical category is not lost	-do-	Women's equal participation in all spheres public and private
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Socialist feminists showed how the labor market is segregated on the basis of gender, in addition to race and class.² By closing in the distinction between the private and public spheres, they revealed how this distinction had in perpetuity disguised the hierarchical gender divide, which went far beyond the private realm. While showing that relationships were gendered, feminists also argued that not all relations are marked with power and there can be oppressive as well as non-oppressive relations.³ Feminists brought out gender as a major form of social inequality that had remained hidden, when political equality was being proclaimed. Socialist/ Marxist feminist focused on domestic labor and liberal feminists wanted all institutions to give equal place to women. Marxist feminists and post modernists argued that the power of capital would always keep women of the working class in oppressive positions. As Table I shows the debate between feminists is by no means over.

Other differences between feminists include post-modernists focusing on discourse as the primary source of power, and radical feminists emphasizing the socio-economic condition. There are differences between feminists on whether countries (like France and Belgium) should ban the full covering of women (burka). Some feminists believe that this will help liberate women from their oppressive community codes. Other feminists believe that this is a marker of identity, and is banned because of the demonization of Muslims. Yet other feminists believe that there can be a third way, arguing that wearing the burka can be regulated and women who chose to wear it be given different choices.

Feminists and Identity Politics

Feminists build on the idea that identities are designed to define a group as opposed to others and constructed to serve the interest of power. The passion invoked though nationalism is used to identify communities vis-à-vis other communities.⁴ Feminists have shown how some identities like ethnic or religious ones are magnified and imposed while other identities like gender can be subsumed or positioned within other identities as and when necessary. For example nationalist movements that have focused

² Maxine Molyneux, "Beyond the Domestic Labour Debate," *New Left Review*, 116. (July 1979).

³ Ana Marta Gonzalez, "Introduction," in Ana Marta Gonzalez and Victor Seidler, *Gender Identities in a Globalized World* (New York: Humanity Books, 2008).

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

on the creation of a new nation state are based on the assumptions of the rights of men. Women also engage in nationalist struggles, but women's rights are not an assumption or priority in these struggles. Women's rights are held back for a later stage, to be discussed after the formation of the nation. Thus the process of nationalism itself is exclusionary. As citizens then, the rights of women are lower compared to the 'natural' rights of men. Men are granted rights by the state whereas women have to struggle for their rights. The experience of women in all the nationalist struggles in South Asia and beyond has shown this.⁵ Even currently, women in India are still struggling for reservation in the Parliament, which traditionally has been a male domain.

Men and women have multiple identities and these are manifest in different and unequal ways. For example, my identities may include each of the following: woman, mother, Indian, Tamil, Hindu, professor, migrant, feminist, sister, South Asian, etc. Each of these identities comes with their roles, role models, stereotypes, relationships and cultural symbols. Further, for the sake of identity politics, I may choose to focus on my South Asian or feminist identity over other identities. At the same time, the male leadership of my community/ state would however like to construct me as a Tamil, Hindu mother and expect me to wear the symbols that may include bangles, head covering, specific dress codes, etc. Other communities would also see me primarily as a Tamil, Hindu mother. In case of inter racial tension only three of these identities would be marked and targeted. My other identities, including that of citizen may be ignored. Further, the gender identity would lead to sexual crimes in case of conflict; denial of voice at time of leadership and decision making, etc. Thus gender and identity roles, relations and behaviors are generally hierarchical, and usually oppressive, but we are so socialized in them, that they are part of our essential identity. It becomes difficult to deny our identity and sometimes we force ourselves to adopt an identity practice even if it is oppressive.

A large majority of women accept and play out these inequalities that are used in identity politics. Failure to do so take away from their identity, angers their community and can even destroy their relationships. Challenging their community identity codes can lead to death. In recent time in India there have been cases of women being killed for marrying within their *gotra* (kin group) which is forbidden in their community. These killings known as honour killings, even though they are crude murder, are ordered by the Khap panchayats – the caste local power group (constituted primarily by unelected male caste leaders). Another example is how Muslim women wear the full veil in western societies, even while living under laws that do not force the veil. The point that these women make, is that instead of force, both by state and community, where women are at the receiving end from both, there should be a third way in which such personal laws and codes can be regulated so that there is an agreement between all three sides: state, community and women who want autonomy from both state and community.

⁵ Kumari Jayawardne, *Feminism and Nationalism in South Asia* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986).

Motherhood, Care and Identity

Patriarchal setups treat mothers and motherhood with a duality that reveals deep contradictions. This is because motherhood and nationhood are seen as co-terminus. Both are highly emotional concepts and give a sense of birth and belonging. Motherhood is evoked in almost all nationalisms as mothers are called upon to socialize their children as future ideal citizens. Since women/ mothers are symbols and represent the honor of their community they are also sexually violated when identities clash. Their autonomy is controlled, and they have to give up their rights in order to be protected. (See Table II). This protection is manifest in South Asian societies where veiling and covering of women is practiced; 'honor killings' are common; boys are privileged at every stage of life; caste based arranged marriages as well as early marriage of women under the age of eighteen continue.

Women themselves treat motherhood with duality and ambivalence. Due to the dominance and universalism of patriarchal practice, women end up negotiating with patriarchy.⁶ Motherhood has played an important role in identity politics of all kinds. For example, some mothers have supported dowry for their sons and oppressed their daughter in laws; they have conformed to community codes in controlling autonomy of daughters; women in conflict areas have asked all sides to listen to their appeal to end conflict as mothers who have given their sons to the nation; mothers have tried to negotiate between conflicting parties with their status as mothers. Many women have also challenged stereotyping motherhood and taken on patriarchal practices. At the same time when it comes to official decision making women have been left out of the process.

Traditional Identity Differences

Feminists show how patriarchy is part of all the identity construction and remains so, unless it is actively challenged and transformed. Thus gender; ethnicity, religion; class; caste; race; nationality; state; citizenship; sexuality etc intersect with patriarchy. This gives men more power and places women in unequal and lower position in all identity groups and sub groups. It also invisibilizes women's experience in these groups, for example, women were victims of sexual violence during the Bangladesh war for liberation, but the official history barely touches on women's role. Women are politically active in all South Asian politics, but when it comes to political representation in parliaments, it is daughters/ wives who matter, the others are treated as party workers. As the awareness of women's rights becomes important women are given more token and symbolic representation, whereas what is required is equal representation.

Racial and class identity also determines destiny, along with gender. In South Asia for example, there is a greater chance of being born and kept alive if you are a male child.

⁶ Denniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2:3(1988): 274–90.
Available from <http://www.wiscomp.org/peaceprints.htm>

You have a better chance, of education, better wages, and more autonomy of choice if you are a man. But you also have better chances if you belong to a privileged race, class or region. Thus a landless Muslim, Dalit, tribal, male in India, will have far less opportunity than an upper class, Hindu, elite woman though the upper class Hindu woman may still be less privileged than her brother. Again as another example, out of the many available, in Sri Lanka, between Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority there is a difference in rights, but within both these ethnicities women have lesser rights than men and leadership positions in both communities are occupied by men. Further there are class differences within Sinhalese and Tamils, and within the same class women have lower status and lesser power. Yet each of these identities has been constructed to oppose the other resulting in Sinhala nationalism and Tamil sub nationalism. Both these nationalisms have been embedded in patriarchy and militarism.⁷ Thus, though women have unequal rights within their community, they still oppose women of another community in conflict situations. Feminists on the contrary, ask for women's solidarity across ethnic and national lines.

Explaining how gender ideology was constituted as an aspect of identity in India, Tanika Sarkar shows how the Hindu Right "simultaneously constructs a revitalized moral vision of domestic and sexual norms that promises to restore the comforts of old sociabilities and familial solidarities without tampering either with women's public role or with consumerist individualism... Older forms of gender ideology are merged with new offers of self-fashioning and a relative political equality in the field of anti-Muslim and anti-secular violence. Patriarchal discipline is reinforced by anticipating and accommodating consumerist aspirations."⁸ Thus as Sarkar argues, even while the upper caste woman modernizes, she does not exercise full choice as domestic and sexual norms/ identity are controlled through somewhat wider but still patriarchal structures. These patriarchal structures are part of the family, community, market and state. The choice of grooms is controlled within high caste and trader castes. The *Jat* community in India for instance has openly said that they would 'allow' girls to be educated, but will not allow them to marry of their own choice. As part of globalization and modernization, women are thus allowed choice in buying internationally branded commodities or using technology but personal laws and norms remain within traditions of patriarchal control.

⁷ Neloufer De Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka, Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007).

⁸ Tanika Sarkar, "Women, Community, and Nation: A Historical Trajectory for Hindu Identity Politics," in *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, ed. Patricia Jefferey and Amrita Basu (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).

Identity and Nationalism

Historically, identity formation was a useful tool in the formation of nationalism as it undermined feudal states led to anti-colonial movements and assisted in creating the modern nation state in the image of its oppressor. Identity has been associated with nationalism and progressive movements. But simultaneously nationalism put back the goal of equality for women for a later time, even though women equally (though differently) participated in identity-nationalist movements. It thus retained the right over women's modernizing just to the extent that was necessary to make them mothers of future leaders. Further right wing movement including fascism shifted identity-nationalist constructions to appropriate this agenda. In India, the Hindu right gave it an upper caste Hindu bent. For example, the image of mother India, is associated with some women goddesses; the notion of a pure women is based on chastity in the case of unmarried women. For married women, serving one's husband, producing sons, etc are the ultimate virtues. Women who challenge this image are considered outsiders and not representative of the mainstream.

Moreover, putting aside of women's rights for a later resolution, which was part of the Indian national movement continues in identity and class based movements today. For example, feminists have critiqued the Maoists for not understanding the feminist agenda. Feminist argue that the struggle for women's inequality has to be part of the process of nationalism or any other movement.

Identity and Conflict

Identity is often the basis of sub nationalism and armed conflicts. For example in South Asia, many Kashmiris may not identify with the Indian nation. The Nagas have been waging a struggle for self determination. Tamils in Sri Lanka had asserted their nationality cause, and so on. When these identity based nationalisms are constructed, gender politics intersects with it and women are given a specific role and status that is not equal to that of men. Patriarchal politics homogenizes identities in order to distinguish between groups and to privilege one group over another. This homogenization constructs a 'us and them'; 'we and the other'; the insider and the outsider. In this process, the other is demonized and given imaginary characteristics. For example, the Hindu right construct the Muslim male as extra virile, and the fundamentalist Muslims see Western women as promiscuous. Identity construction and the politics of the outside/ uncivilized other, increases during crisis and armed conflict. At such times the perception of identity by patriarchal and feminist discourses as explained in Table II are further homogenized and become part of a patriotic discourse and violence against the other/ the outsider is justified. In the patriarchal discourse male identity is identified with superior citizenship, ideal warriors, upholders of patriotic duty, brave hearts, protectors of women, nation and purity of race, homogenization of culture, and intolerance of dissent. Females are identified as supporters of the nation, patriotic, symbols of culture, reproducers for the nation, care givers for the male and nation, etc.

Patriarchal politics makes an enemy out of difference. A different identity is demonized, constructed as an enemy other, and force is advocated to deal with this 'other'. In the same discourse there is gender stereotyping, increasing masculinity and militarization. Former US President George Bush's dictum 'you are with us or against us' exemplifies this. There are other examples - the pitting of one tribal/primordial identity against another as in the case of the Hutus versus the Tutsi's or the Kyrgyz versus the Uzbek minority - all carry elements of militarization of identity and the foregrounding of masculinities.

Table II

How Identity Politics intersects with Patriarchy and Feminist response

Identity Issues	Patriarchal view of Men	Patriarchal view of Women	Feminists view
Privileging and hierarchy of different identities	Ethnicity/ religion/colour/ Class/ caste/ tribe manliness	Women + motherhood of ethnic/religion/class/race etc.	Accepting difference as individuals; equally; as diversity
Roles in identity And Difference	Protectors Producers Predators Of difference	Symbols; markers; Protected; Reproducers of difference	De-constructors Respecters; tolerate difference
Relation with identity	Power in public and private or powerlessness in public but power in private	Dependants- Mothers/sisters/ daughters of powerful and powerless. Negotiators with power	Independent choice of identity.
Negotiations with identity	As power and privilege	With ambiguity but negotiating also with power and privilege	With acceptance and interaction
Identity during conflict and crises	Insider men as masculine/ patriotic/ Defender of race as opposed to outsider / other/ men	Insider women as racially pure/ honourable/ supporter of insider men in opposition to outsider/ illegal/ culturally backward woman.	Women as internationally linked without a nation.

Feminist politics oppose such binary politics as it leads to retribution, violence and most of all it seeks to exclude and force women to either one side. The precious space of autonomous women is lost in such discourse and practice. Wars and conflicts accentuate difference and make it violent. This is the time when stereotyping and demonizing is strongest. Table II shows how the dominant patriarchal discourse, views gender identity and its intersection with other identity politics. For example, the patriarchal discourse views men as representing power, privilege, protectors of identity. Simultaneously women are represented as symbols, bearers of identity on their bodies; reproducers of identity and so on.

Feminists have deconstructed identity politics and its intersection with gender politics. But the practice of negative identity politics continues and differences in gender, nationalities, classes, groups continue to be used as a tool of oppression and inequality. Feminists are attempting to re-create an understanding of difference and looking at multiple ways of approaching a problem. There has been an internal debate between feminists on how gender and identity politics and the praxis to give women equality and empowerment. (Table I)

A number of recent feminist debates raise these issues of identity construction. For instance how should feminists react to the invasion of Afghanistan? Many feminists supported the removal of the Taliban regime by the international coalition led by the US because the brutal patriarchal regime enforced the veil and segregation and denied young girls education. The liberal feminists argue that the Afghan occupation is a just war, and that a liberal peace was possible. Socialist and radical feminists on the other hand argued that cultural change could not be brought through foreign troops and occupation. That occupation was an extension of imperialism and militarism. Post modern feminists stated that Western standards or modernization could not be imposed on traditional culture. Meanwhile, the forces that first helped create the Taliban, then bombed them out of power, now seek to make a deal with different type of militia, who have little regard for the autonomy of women. Feminist theorists who had hopes about women's liberation from the Afghan occupation are also raising questions about this.

Crises accentuate the already existing difference between people and enforce gender stereotypes. During economic crises, women and migrants are generally the first to lose their jobs. In the Russian transition to capitalism women were the first to lose employment and shift to informal domestic labor. Globalization has brought more workers into the informal economy and more women than men have been displaced. During economic crises the outsider tends to be blamed. Instead of addressing the root cause for the economic and social crises, minorities, migrants and especially their women are targeted.

Feminist understand globalization as a restructuring which enables neo-liberal control of economies by transnational actors, especially global corporations, with demands for cheap labor, combined with decrease in social services and control of labor migration. At the same time feminists see this process as highly masculinized and racialized, where women of colour are least able to participate in it and are more oppressed by it.⁹ Others see the migration of women as care workers or through trafficking as being more exploitative. At the same time, globalization also co-opts more women, giving them the illusion of greater autonomy by allowing them greater market choice.

⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Wester Eyes, Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs* 28 No.2 (2002): 499-535. Jayati Ghosh, *Never Done and Poorly Paid, Women's Work in Globalizing India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2010).

Many theorists talked of equality, but they did not talk of patriarchy. Feminist theory has contributed by paying attention to patriarchy and the invisibilization of women. The consequence of gender research has been that identity politics and their relation to gender are also undergoing transformations in state systems and cultures.¹⁰ The Feminist challenge is to seek to transform these differences to ensure that identity politics do not create exclusions, false hierarchies, intolerance and violence against the other. The argument is: 'While recognizing the importance and specificity and difference, feminists are attempting to develop approaches to thinking about gender in an international or global context that avoids reductionism and avoid marginalizing or rendering invisible the experiences of different women.'¹¹ Feminist politics seeks to show that while identities exist they need not be factors for exclusion but can actually promote diversity, acceptance and respect.

The role of feminist praxis is to challenge the politics that separates and excludes women through subjective identity construction, where women are bearers of identity but not treated equally and patriarchal structures continue to assert. Feminists have deconstructed the notion of difference as essentially oppositional and threatening, and instead have shown difference as part of diversity and existence. They have done this by unraveling the gender identity which for centuries was essentialized and used to make women unequal. Feminists have shown that identity is just one of the many characteristics that people have and that difference and identity can become the basis of inclusive politics and social and economic equity.

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¹⁰ Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹ Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).