

Panel Discussion: Feminist Theory: 1

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How does 'theory' travel from one culture to another? What is the point of recognition of 'theory'? This is a question worth posing because a great deal of knowledge/ power nexus for which the post-modernist theory has welcomed Michel Foucault has got embedded in the construction of such theory itself. 'Theory', despite its iconoclastic *accoutrement* has re-inforced the dominance of the First World over the Third World. With all the de-centring and de-stabilisation that has been talked about, the location of theory has continued to be finally ensconced in what Catherine Hall has designated in a different context, white, male and middle class.

In such a context, I agreed to talk about the complex trajectory opened up by my theoretical understanding of Laura Mulvey's diagnosis of visual pleasure in the dominant narrative cinema of the time.

In the heady days of the seventies Calcutta had a lively Film Society movement, a heated but by no means monolithic left movement and by the early eighties, alongside the large women's organisations that formed the women's wings of the large mass-based parties, including the major left parties, a number of autonomous women's groups. I was part of a group that started *Sachetana* (literally, women who are aware). My theoretical ambience was fashioned forth by a convergence of left-democratic aspiration for social transformation and a distinct awakening to the possibilities of feminist theory as a crucial cutting edge in this.

The significance of the domination of the male gaze, to which Laura Mulvey's article alerted us, was absorbed by some of us without being initiated into the psychoanalysis within which female sexuality was analyzed in this seminal article. Its theoretical position on the women's movement in which I was involved entered into a symbiosis with John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. What started off as, to use Prof Mulvey's compelling phrase, 'cinephilia', soon bounced off in different directions, along modes in which the image of Woman (as opposed to 'women') was construed. The original site of the cinema was soon abandoned in our explorations, both experiential and historical, of the different strata of social institutions through which patriarchy controls the image of the woman. Nearly twenty years later, in 2000 I wrote up the full significance of what was at stake. I quote this because I found it interesting in the context of the Seminar.

The process of what Simone de Beauvoir called 'becoming woman' is, inexorably, a political one, embedded, as it is, in the power imbalance within social organisations if that perpetuate inequity through patriarchal control over women. This is the ubiquitous mode that reinforces class-caste exploitation along ethnicity and religious identities.

What has been called, in liberal parlance, 'subjection of women' is, however, not just a social pathology that can be extracted like a rotten tooth. Subtle process of

consensus building deployed by ideological apparatuses hold the hegemonic domination in place. Gender representation in the media has rightly been identified by feminists as a site for interrogation with the professed aim of gaining a critical edge to resistance against such manipulative domination. This does, one must admit, involve a subtler and richer reading of the texts, bringing out the political underbelly of representation.

As Sangari and Vaid's insightful collection of essays in colonial history brings out, the colonial intervention demanded a re-moulding and re-casting of women (Sangari and Vaid, 1989). The process however, was not a simple, unilinear one. Multiple patriarchies, within which gender was re-constructed, meant multiple ways of making female representation acceptable. The so-called 'modernity' of the Nation State that has exercised the post-modernist articulation of post-coloniality was not the only force at work. 'Tradition' and 'community' were equally amenable to manipulation by patriarchy duly aided and abetted by class and caste.

John Berger's analysis of 'seeing' as forms of domination (Berger, 1972) and Laura Mulvey's diagnosis of heroines in Hollywood cinema brought into focus the standard play of the 'male gaze'.

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.
(Laura Mulvey, 1975)

However, within the feminist movement the world over, there have been attempts to subvert the male 'gaze'. The multiple perspectives thrown open by Berger's 'ways of seeing' may be allied to different forms of questioning the essentialised 'subject' position. Reading against the grain/ gaze (Bonner et al., 1992, p.5) is likely to yield a critical edge to the received notion of cultural representation. The sexual politics of gendered representation gives rise to sexual/ textual politics (Millet, 1970; Moi, 1985). The cultural forms are textualised to yield such readings against the grain/ gaze.

Politics of representation further demands that this process of textualising is also contextualised. Questioning the mediation process of visual and print culture from within the women's movement does call for a closer look at the political scenario that provides a working ambience for the gender representation. Though this does not signify a one-to-one correspondence between the representation and the political scenario, a play of the 'residual' and the 'emergent' need to be properly unpacked (Williams, 1980, pp. 40 ff) in order to take up political positions vis-a-vis the gendering of representation.

II

The politics of gendered representation has a distinctive trajectory in the context of South Asia (Jayawardena and Alvis, 1996, pp. xi ff) while the interpretation of colonialism is confronted with what may be called a feminist counter—interpellation, in

the early pioneering work of Sangari and Vaid (1989) or of Tharu and Lalitha (1991). The currently trendy epithet ‘post—colonial’ to my mind, sits uneasily on these two collective endeavours. The term itself is not sufficiently critical of the degradation of the colonial process itself, nor is it sensitive enough to the agency of the multiple strata of the colonized social structures, stratified by class/ caste gender ethnicity and religious identity. In this context, it will be salutary to recall Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan’s warning against ‘cultural determinism’ in the analyses of gender in representation

What is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women’s self-representation.

(Sunder Rajan, 1993, p. 129)

State, family and selfhood are captured under the rubric of ‘gender and representation’ and these constitute different components of the patriarchal domination that is naturalised. Locating gender in cultural representation is, therefore, at least a two-way process, if not more. It helps us to unravel the fissured process of closure of options and opening of choices. It is a chequered story of complicity and resistance.

III

The complex ways in which theory is encountered is further brought out in the ways in which the essentialising process that fixes women gets extended in the forms in which colonial societies engender their nation—building process. This is where Said’s *Orientalism* provided a plank from which the deployment of the category of Oriental, in our particular case, the Indian women, by the contradictory forces that were the main players in the field could be examined. The Imperialising gaze captured it from two different sets. One was the victim status, which made the indigenous patriarchy seem barbarous hence requiring surveillance and rule. The other is that of the temptress, the dangerous ‘other’. The most popular forms of this may be found in Rider Haggard, Conrad, or, Kipling.

In fact, while co-teaching a course on feminist critique of ‘viewing’ women, with a Pakistani friend in Lahore, we were going through Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* to unravel what Laura Mulvey had said in her seminal article written over a quarter of a century ago. We discovered that one of the ways in which the requisite creation of ‘otherness’ was achieved was by making the heroine of Hispanic origin. This immediately brought an Orientalist reinforcement to the male gaze.

One of the major sites of struggle in the post-colonial societies is that the identities are sought to be essentialised in terms of the religious communities in which the subject happens to be born. In a collection of essays called *Embodied Violence* several South Asian feminists sat down to discuss the ways in which patriarchal religious communities which get promoted to the Althusserian category of ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ try to essentialise the female sexuality as emblems of their particular community’s honour. This, we discover, was true of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists,

which were the main ruling communities on the sub-continent. It was also perpetuated in India, at least, through the system of Personal Laws, in the ways in which women are subjected to the male gaze of laws. This happens despite the fact that justice is visualised as a woman with her eyes tied!

In a globalized world where the International Capital is deliberately spawning religion—based identity as the basis of politics, both as a friend or a foe, and the possibility of violence against women's sexuality as a way of establishing dominance, our fight against the twin fundamentalism of the market and religion cannot simply be in a constant endeavour at fire fighting. It is, I submit, a constantly evolving theoretical position. Being part of this brand of feminist theorising, that may or may not get the blessing of the conventionally designated sites of 'theory', I acknowledge my debt to our guest Laura Mulvey, who, as far as I am concerned, was one of the first to dig the road.

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