

Panel Discussion: Feminist Theory 2

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I shall start from a point raised by Laura Mulvey, namely that Feminist theories are critical theories. Socialisation means internalisation of cultural codes transmitted to us through agencies of power, and criticality lies in cracking that code, in taking a look at its backside or underside meant to remain invisible generally. This characteristic is what Feminist theory shares with Marxist theory for example.

How does this apply in the Indian situation? John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* talks of the European nude as a specific visual art form where the supine female body transmits a sign of submission. Berger gives examples from non-European art where instead of this supineness in nudity he discovers a reciprocity between the male and the female bodies. He takes two examples, that of an 11th century Indian sculpture of Vishnu and Laxmi and an 18th century Rajasthani painting. Now, does this observation signify a displacement of patriarchal order? Obviously not. In the Sanskrit-based culture in 11th century, or in 18th century Rajasthan, patriarchy is very much in place. Only the code is a different code, the signs of patriarchy are differently constituted. Moreover, sexual reciprocity in visual representation need not be a reflection of reality at all, it may constitute a distancing from or sublimation of a reality where subjugation of woman is an established social mode. In Berger's examples, what is being presented in each case is an epiphanic or a divine scene where the figures are idealised and iconised, offering a harmony that contrasts with the possible violent tenor of real life.

In India, even from the beginning, in the 1970s, Feminist theorisations have always been embedded in empirical specificities. Indian Feminism has always been accused of being derivative, Westernised. For example, an American scholar named Patrick Harrigan joined Hindu conservatives to accuse Feminists condemning the event of the so called 'Sati' of Roop Kanwar, of being part of a Westernised elite, who did not understand the Indian woman's psyche. Incidentally, Marxists also have often been subjected to similar charges. The point is that notwithstanding these charges, Feminist theorisation in India has run on its own distinctive lines and it has not always looked like 'theory', being very often embedded in a historical discourse. Tanika Sarkar's *Words to Win* in which she translates and edits the first-known autobiography of a Bengali woman, in fact attempts a theorisation of woman's writings, but the attempt to theorise is continually also an enterprise to contextualise. The interweaving of caste, class, gender and race (the last because of the colonial underpinning) becomes part of the method of theoretical enterprise for Feminists scholars.

The experience of colonialism includes in it the reinvention of traditions under nationalist hegemony. Signs and icons representing pre—colonial 'traditional' past, that have been integrated into our urban literate culture, were largely constructed in the 19th century as nationalist consciousness emerged. Our enterprise of 'Modernity' in which the positioning of women remains one of the most important questions, also integrated, from time to time, such reinvention of tradition. Such constructions of identity as Kumkum

Sangari points out in *Politics of the Possible* have in our situation a seclusionist and in-breeding tendency: 'class, race, religion, community, caste, gender. Each can be used to drive a wedge into the other. And much of this can remain a display of disaligned positionality that never reconnects with the unities in oppressions'. If Feminist theory is critical theory, then one of its important functions in our context has been to find conceptual tools for unpacking such constructions. Criticality comes from the need to understand the junctions, intersections, contradictions and continuities between them and not to settle down into a primordialist identity politics that uses one category to exclude another. This is the theoretical breakthrough that Feminists in our context have been striving for.