



## CONCEPT OF FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

<sup>1</sup>Pavan Kumar Sanvare, <sup>2</sup>Anjali Mishra and <sup>3</sup>Dharmananda Pal

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, SunRise University, Alwar, Rajasthan (India)  
Email: [pawankumarsaware82@gmail.com](mailto:pawankumarsaware82@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Theory is an important preoccupation of articles published in Feminism & Psychology. This Virtual Special Issue includes 10 of those published since the journal's inception that have a primary focus on theoretical issues related to two related topics – differences and the biological. The concern with differences includes the socially constructed categories sex and gender, as well as sexuality and social class. Those articles addressing the biological represent critical scholarship that is working to negotiate a place for the biology within feminist psychology and entails moving away from the view that the biological is natural and innate. This introductory article addresses how theory fits within feminist psychology and offers a brief history of debates concerning differences and the biological before offering summaries and observations related to each selected article. The featured articles can be located on the Feminism & Psychology website and are listed in Appendix 1 at the end of this article.

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### Introduction:

Feminism tackles gender inequality, which is manifested in different forms such as sexism, androcentrism, female oppression, female subjugation, female marginalization and other aspects of gender bias. Philosophy has a very long history with a wide range of problems, some of which have been periodical and others perennial. Some of these problems have bordered on the question of first principles of being, substance, cause and effect, the nature and essence of things, the nature of the human person, the nature and function of human society et cetera. Philosophy has been defined by many persons in different ways.

We shall not go into such details here. What we wish to establish here is that whatever stands as a philosophical ideology or speculation is simply an attempt to respond to unique problems of human existential situations or about the universe. Even speculations about the existence or non-existence of God is aimed at explaining better, the meaning of human life, the origin and destiny of humankind as well as the origin and future of the universe at large. For instance, it is often said that ancient Greek philosophy began with “wonder’ about the co-existence of unity in diversity, change and permanence, order and chaos in the universe and

other problems of this sort. The different epochs of Western philosophy have evolved just as the focus on philosophical problems has continually alternated between those bordering on the universe and those bordering on human existential situations. In recent times much emphasis has been placed on “problem-solving philosophies”.

For some professional philosophers, this has become the current criterion of doing philosophy, thereby calling to question the significance of archaic philosophical speculations of the classics like those of Plato and Aristotle to current day-to-day existential problems in varying cultural settings and indigenous autonomies. Some of the lessons that can be drawn from the long history of Western philosophy, has been the realization that human existential problems and the things human beings really wonder about may be similar over generations; moreover human existential problems do not remain the same, they evolve from place to place and from time to time. In this documented long history of philosophy in the West, as Grimshaw and Fricker observes, we see a host of “Great men of ideas” but women seem to be absent (552).

Does this mean that women never wrote anything philosophical or did not speculate about the universe or about human existential problems? What

could explain the absence or scarcity of women in the list of historic philosophical gurus other than an age-long practice of androcentrism especially in documenting the contributions of earlier thinkers? According to Grimshaw and Fricker, feminist philosophy arose when women started majoring in philosophy, many of them were shocked that what male philosophers had written about women were riddled with sexism and misogyny (552).

In the light of the feminist struggle, many feminist authors (mostly) women have seen the need to correct this misconceived prejudices about the female sex in the philosophies of outstanding male philosophers. It is a very common feature in the discipline of philosophy for philosophy itself to become its own problem. Grimshaw and Fricker try to explicate one instance that supports this by arguing that philosophy over the millennia has been unjust to women. They observe that it is shocking that philosophy which purports to be searching for truth has been blind for all these hundreds of centuries to the truth of the injustice of women oppression, subjugation and marginalization; and that it is disheartening that some philosophers who were supposed to be holders of truth and wisdom rather spoke in favour of the falsehood of the inferiority of the woman's intellect and proceeded to justify same. The exclusion and marginalization of women's contribution to philosophy in philosophy, is a problem of philosophy that has been caused by the way philosophy has been done for many centuries. In the attempt to explain how feminist philosophy relates to feminism Grimshaw and Fricker makes the following observations:

Feminist philosophy is concerned with correcting the wrong impression that philosophy is a discipline in which a woman cannot do exceeding well as if male philosophers have superior intellectual abilities than females.

- Feminist philosophy seeks to break all formal barriers to the independent study of philosophy.
- Women, which is anchored on some misconstrued arguments that being a woman and a philosopher is problematic.
- Feminist philosophy seeks to expunge from philosophy all sexist and misogynist definitions of the human nature; and insisting that women are not inferior to men and are not less capable of reason or virtue.
- Feminist philosophy kicks against the constant tendency in philosophical theories to move towards different forms of binaries and thought-patterns presented in terms of

gendered dichotomies. Examples include man-woman, culture-nature, reason-emotion, mind-body, public-private, production-reproduction et cetera. Grimshaw and Fricker aver that although these binaries do not always take the same form, there is always a sexist interpretation of such binaries especially those having to do with gender (571). Philosophical books by women are often not included in the shelves labeled "philosophy".

- They are often placed under gender studies or women studies. Feminist philosophies advocate that this practice needs to be stopped. Feminist philosophy proposes that philosophical inquiry should reject "false universalism", because no philosophy is universally binding and applicable (571-574).

Attempting a Feminist History of Philosophy As already hinted, the romance of feminism and philosophy has had its effects. One direction of looking at such effects is in the re-reading and reformation of the history of Western philosophy. Feminists that are engaged in the rereading and the reforming of conventional Western philosophical narratives on history are always embarrassed by the fact that women philosophers and their contributions have been excluded from such historical narrations as well as the negative characterization of women by the few who even ventured into saying something about women. Feminist philosophers have strongly criticized these features in the history of Western philosophy. By virtue of these criticisms, feminist philosophers have enlarged the philosophical canon to re-evaluate and revise it in a manner that includes women and their contributions.

In this respect, feminist history of philosophy is bound to show some dissimilarity with the conventional accounts of the history of western philosophy we have been so familiar with. In her article in the book *Feminist Reflections on the History of Philosophy*, Charlotte Witt divides feminist history of philosophy into different categories: (i) feminist criticisms of the philosophical canon as misogynist (ii) feminist revision of the History of Philosophy (iii) feminist appropriation of canonical philosophers (2). Her foregoing categorization reflects the methodological approaches that feminist philosophy generally adopts. In other words, most feminist works on philosophy is either critiquing the past with respect to the exclusion of women and their contributions, underscoring that this is a product of androcentric

bias; or investigating gender bias or misogynist positions; or concentrating on exposing the contributions of feminists and women at the present towards tackling the problems of exclusion, marginalization and androcentrism; or articulating the woman's standpoint or feminist standpoint. According to Witt (2-3), feminist criticism of the philosophical canon as misogynist takes three different dimensions. The first dimension focuses on the readings that record in explicit language, misogyny of celebrated philosophers (like Aristotle).

This involves study of text and textual analyses and comparative study of different works by the same philosopher to determine the extent to which critical thought has been burdened by misogynist prejudices. What study of text and textual analyses also aim at is the exposition of gendered interpretations of philosophical concepts. This is the second dimension, which is concerned with readings that argue for gendered interpretations of theoretical concepts. For instance, in his description of human reproduction, Aristotle identified the woman with the concept of matter, while he identified the man as the form. This is Aristotle's misogynist idea elevating the man's biological contribution to the human reproductive process to the status of an essence and the woman's to the status of accident. In criticizing Aristotle's positions on the nature of the woman, some male scholars always want to use less provoking languages such as: "Aristotle was mistaken..." or "Aristotle misconceived..." Some feminists think there is no need for allowing our regard for the esteemed classical academic guru to deter us from speaking the naked truth, namely, Aristotle was wrong and his positions, false. The third dimension focuses on what Witt describes as criticisms that diagnose where canonical philosophers and philosophy went wrong (3).

### **The nature of feminist theory**

The question of what constitutes *feminist theory* proves to be somewhat complicated as the meanings of both *theory* and *feminist* are up for debate. In 2000, the inaugural issue of *Feminist Theory* addressed what "counts" as feminist theory in the editorial as well as in an interchange among three feminist scholars. In her contribution, Sarah Ahmed (2000, p. 97) playfully imagined the somebody doing the counting:

I can almost see a ghostly image of a woman, upstairs in the dusty attics of our institutions, counting out theories, counting out feminisms. ... I can almost hear her voice, gleeful and joyous, as she throws out some works, names them as impostors, saying that they don't count, that they can't be

counted. Am I that woman? Have I been her? Are you her?

I could only reply "Yes, I am that woman" – well, at least in the pragmatic sense that I have to choose or there's no point to the project. Besides pointing out that what counts as feminist theory is diverse and contested, Sarah Ahmed's (2000) paper is also particularly helpful in shifting the grammar of theory from noun to verb, that is, she argues that theory is not a fixed object or end product but a process of critique and analysis.

She argues further that we make and recognize feminist theory within the constraints of our socio-historical contexts and proposes that feminist theory may include "... *the posing of a critical challenge to the criteria that operate within the academy about what constitutes theory per se*" (p. 99). She goes on to highlight the interconnection of theory and practice, such that feminist theorizing often occurs outside the academy, but regardless of location, is critical in questioning what is taken for granted: "In this sense, we can think of feminist theory as being produced precisely where social norms about gender are contested: whether that contestation takes place in educational settings, in political mobilization or in everyday life and social interaction" (p. 99). But, of course, the explanatory work of theory also addresses broader social processes that may link local contexts together. It "moves" and "re-mak[es] 'what is'" (p. 100) by questioning local common sense and the categories of analysis adopted by scholars (and in everyday social interactions). Challenging a well-worn binary, activism for Sarah Ahmed is a form of practical theorizing – "affecting or transforming the world in a way which is better, even if what we think is better, can never be fully agreed upon or fully decided" (p. 102).

At a minimum, we could say that feminist theorizing entails a critical stance (openness to varied perspectives and *reflexivity* are emphasized) that is decidedly political and directed towards social change (Mann, 2012). To unpack this a little, the obvious political project entails recognizing how power relations are implicated in the restrictions on girls and women that are associated with social norms, the knowledge that is accorded legitimacy, as well as more formal regulations, such as laws. Feminist theorizing, at least within psychology, seeks to explain the lives of girls and women (and more generally people who are marginalized by virtue of their identification with the categories, sex, gender, and sexuality) in ways that make visible varied perspectives. Highlighting such diversity then points to possibilities for social change and to imagine the future in novel ways. Although reflexivity has

several meanings (Morawski, 1994), the one that I would like to emphasize is how “what we already know” shapes our understanding of the world. To be reflexive in this sense means critically reflecting on how theorists/researchers and their methods affect the process of theorizing and producing knowledge. This too opens up a space for alternative visions that can be debated and vetted for their transformative potential in reworking power relations and hence our everyday lives.

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