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Roy, Saptaparna

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# Gender Studies: Problematics of Pedagogy in Theory and Praxis

Saptaparna Roy[69]
*Heritage Institute of Technology- Kolkata*

*Gender studies as a cross-disciplinary field has gained currency for the last forty years, an expansive field in which debates on pedagogical strategies bridging theory and praxis have been the crux of research on syllabus framing, selection of theoretical paradigms and empirical methods, philosophy behind policy making, creating instructional design and executing classroom teaching. The history of feminist activism, the specificity of feminist issues seeking resolution, the contemporaneity and urgency of events, the local, global or glocal contents and contexts of occurrences, the dynamism of socio-cultural spaces and the politicisation behind who can 'speak' on what can be included and what must be excluded intervene in determining an inclusive and reflective teaching-learning process. Is it possible to prepare a universal formulation for teaching gender studies across levels and purposes? Is it an iconoclastic approach to hierarchy between the facilitator and the learners in the classroom or is it the dissemination of lived experiences foregrounding reflexivity or is it transformative learning that will impact social change? 'Who' is the instructor and 'who' are the learners? Interestingly, the fluidity of gender studies and seeing 'gender' as doing or a performative further problematises the teaching methodology. What is the meaning of 'feminist' within the premise of feminist pedagogy? The need for intersectionality of different disciplines to teach gender studies and the engagement of reflexivity both from the teacher and the taught will lead to transformative learning. The teaching of gender studies is a therapy resulting in healing or should it be restricted to academic dialogue alone. Is there too much theorising? Can the nature of the learning environment in institutionalised set ups give way to radical criticism or can the conditions of learning be made free of institutionalised control? Other issues such as understanding men and masculinities with respect to gender studies, gender studies through the e-learning platform, blending affective and cognitive faculties while teaching, understanding the sociology of gender and systematic perpetuation of power structures will be reviewed. This present paper will critically examine the schism between theory and practice in the pedagogy of gender studies by analysing selective feminist texts and situating them in contexts.*

***Keywords:*** *Gender studies, pedagogical strategies, theory, praxis, feminist*

## Introduction

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed the burgeoning of Gender Studies departments across the globe. As a discipline Gender Studies is a field in action that arose out of a need for gender equality and equity and as such must face challenges and constant change to justify its provenance in practice. This brings us to the question: can there be a universalised methodology for teaching gender studies that cements the crevice in theory and praxis?

[69] Correspondence should be addressed to Ms. Saptaparna Roy, E-mail: saptaparna.roy2013@gmail.com, saptaparna.roy@heritageit.edu

Gender studies cannot be considered in isolation because of its intersectionality with other disciples, especially women's activist movements and involves a critique of power relations and even conventional methods of criticism. Judith Butler (1994) called gender research a discipline without "proper objects" of study, meaning that gender studies must involve almost everything. This understanding of gender research is founded on the notion that it cannot be segregated from an analysis of power structures of class, caste, ethnicity, race, religion, culture and sexuality. Pluralism and diversification marks gender studies as it criss-crosses with social sciences, natural sciences and humanities. Consequently, as a subject it is appealing to many beyond just practitioners of the field. Paulo Freire (1976), an eminent theorist in critical pedagogy subscribes to the view that subjugated groups must control their own learning and their own history and not be taught commandingly by others. Moreover, bell hooks in her trilogy on learning comments on critical thinking, experiences and approaches to gender, class and race studies in the education system (hooks 1994, hooks 2003, hooks 2009).

### Universal/ You n (free) verse et al

Debates hover on the construction of instructional design and its ideology for the teaching-learning process of gender studies as the risk of submitting to power structures and cultural stereotypes within the classroom, staffroom and institution is very high. Here the role of the recipient is critical as his/ her participation in the knowledge creation process and shouldering of social responsibility for the impact it will create is profound. However, attempts need to be directed at generating awareness of the imbalance in power structures and the need for framing alternate structures through reflexivity on the part of both the instructor and the students. Thus, pedagogy for gender studies cannot be wholly restricted to intellectual discussion but must be enriched by experiences of both parties involved. From the syllabus to the execution, equal opportunity laws must be implemented to ensure engagement of all individuals and groups in the classroom. Heteronormativity in society can lead to an exclusion of groups such as the third sex; hence sensitivity towards all dimensions of gender must be imbibed.

Gender studies alone cannot determine the methodology for implementing social change or fixing strategies for power criticism. In fact, postcolonial, norm-critical, feminist, anti-racist criticisms and other power critiques contribute enormously to the teaching of gender studies. It can now be unanimously agreed that gender studies cannot have one universal approach to address this multifarious, expanding discipline that blurs borders between fields of research.

### Instructor/ Instruct-her

As instructors do we need to only know theories or be abreast of research in areas of social discrimination? Can a class of gender studies be holistic without a reference not only to the historic but also the contemporary movements striving for equality or the laws thereof that impact such occurrences? In such a case can the instructor be in a position of power before the students and at the same time critique the very foundation of power struggle.

Gender studies demands the involvement of learners both theoretically as well as practically because of the very nature of the subject that calls into question the conditions of living. Didactical practices have often emerged from phases of women's activism; hence the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of life merge the private and the public. Gender studies thus appeals to both emotive and cognitive faculties. Academic discussion along with the sharing of lived experiences in the classroom enriches the learning outcome by quenching affective and intellectual requirements.

### Classroom/ Classed-room

Is the classroom a simulation of a real-life scenario? Yes. Should the classroom be classified or should it construct a classless environment keeping in mind the heterogeneity in the learners' backgrounds? Even

differences in learning styles and reception between the sexes can be a challenge to combat. Here, group work amongst girls and boys can help build solidarity and achieve the desired outcome of a balance in power. This will ensure that independence melts into interdependence amidst the sexes. How can the instructor design pedagogy in a way that meets the affinities of all? Content and especially, criticism must give way to integrate differences in opinion. Can a man be a feminist? Yes, of course. Anyone who voices the subjugation of the marginalised Other such as women can be a feminist.

The American researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) coined the term "intersectionality" in the context of gender. Gender along with the other intersecting socio-cultural constructions undergoes a complicated and intricate dynamism in performance. How an individual subject performs gender through the changing relations with race, religion, ethnicity, class, and caste is a concern to be reckoned with. The classroom must be a space that builds an inclusive environment to manage differences discreetly between individuals and should not be a construct to strengthen exclusion. Interpersonal communication between learners lends fluidity to gender without any fixed meaning making. Thus in the classroom such tools must be employed that restrict exclusion and the acceptance of the normative and instead promotes an awareness of power relations.

## Texts in Contexts

Reading texts in contexts is a crucial aspect of gender studies whereby a text is read in its own condition and all preconceived notions are put to test to broaden the horizon of learning. Reading incisively is not enough for criticism but gaining multiple perspectives on the text is essential. Learners then should be able to recognise their own positionality in terms of their ideology and also learn to appreciate other viewpoints. There are several reading techniques to approach a text. The purpose of study impacts the selection of the reading process. A close and responsive reading allows the reader to empathise with the alternative perspectives on the text. To understand the author's intention in writing the text is significant but situating the text in the time of its production as well as the present is important too.

For instance, let us scan Mahasweta Devi's dramatic short story, *Draupadi* (1978) translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak into English in 1981. This feminist manifesto is pitted against the Naxalite movement in the Naxalbari area of West Bengal which was being thwarted by the then Indian government and it foregrounds a female protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen who is on the top of the hit list of Senanayak. Interestingly, Spivak makes a deconstructive reading of the text where she proves how the nameless Senanayak stands for 'theory', a First World scholar trying to pin down the native Dopdi, the Santhal rebel who represents 'practice'. The historical background for the text is crucial for understanding the power dialectics in it and to make a post- colonial reading of it. But my contention is to highlight a pragmatist-feminist reading of the text. Dopdi, the essentialist who is addressed by the derivative form of the Sanskrit name Draupadi is intertextualised with the epic heroine and at the same time made to go further ahead of Draupadi in her final destiny. She is countered in a gang rape under the instruction of Senanayak but she belies all definitions of femininity by refusing to clothe herself after she is raped multiple times and stripped of her clothing. This objectified unarmed subject fails all strategies of an encounter devised by Senanayak. Dopdi, the double subaltern overturns hierarchies of power and emerges victorious even in her defeat. Theory used to validate a text's reading for academic purposes is only one aspect of pedagogy but with a subject such as gender studies it can never be complete without reference to the issue of the present rape culture. Considering the fact that a gender studies classroom will consist of men as well as women, the text must be dealt with cautiously. Mostly girls are of the opinion that rape as an instrument of oppression is perpetuated on women alone but it is the responsibility of the instructor to alert them on the contrary view. Men too can be subjected to rape. No gender studies classroom ever speaks of the immediate actions to be taken or averted once one experiences rape. In a matter-of-fact

way the instructor must share with the learners the basic knowledge related to rape, witness, evidence, and laws in the present context. The social aspect of such epistemological concern is undoubtedly rooted in the culture where the text is being taught. Pragmatists believe in grounding knowledge through experience and subscribe to a pluralist approach to women's experiences. Pragmatist-feminists try to bridge the schism between theory and praxis and utilise learning for social reform movements.

## Philosophy and Pedagogy

Sidney Hook, a 20th century pragmatist said, "social action is the mother of inspiration and not, as is usually imagined, its offspring" (1991 [1940], 3). Feminist theory having evolved from women's activist movements includes the learning from social activism. Pragmatist- feminists have a socio-political focus and promote definite enlightening changes. In Seigfried's words pragmatist feminism "reject(s) philosophizing as an intellectual game that takes purely logical analysis as its special task. For both, philosophical techniques are means, not ends" (1996, 37).

In the present, pragmatist-feminists attempt to make radical changes to the dominance of socio-political structures. Feminist reformers such as Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman raised their voice against the subjugation of women, children and minorities. Jane Addams symbolised the cross-fertilisation of pragmatism and feminism by restructuring the social order to ensure justice for women and the underprivileged by working as an interpreter across class and cultures (Fischer 2005).

For pragmatist-feminists, pluralistic communities have epistemological value and provide the base for an inclusive problem-solving approach to social issues. Pragmatists view education as a socio-political power that shapes society and individuals just as contemporary feminists feel in assessing curriculum and teaching methodology. The social context is of greatest primacy since it unfolds the changing realities. Pragmatist-feminists believe in incorporating individual experiences in a pluralistic dialogue of manifold realities and all parties engaged in the situation must contribute to the making of a solution.

Both feminists and pragmatists have a similar opinion about epistemology that relies on experience and relationality. Seigfried in *Pragmatism and Feminism* enumerates features of pragmatism that are meaningful for feminists. The four dualistic aspects of rationalistic philosophy that John Dewey and some feminists critique, she mentions as follows:

(a)The reductionism in doing and the over-emphasis on thinking and reflection;
(b) the derision for bodies and matter and eulogising of spirit and immateriality,
(c) the stark distance between practice and theory, and
(d) the insignificance of changes and the supremacy of a fixed reality. (1996, 113)

Even Jane Duran in "The Intersection of Pragmatism and Feminism" (1993) reiterates that feminist theorists have looked down at the obsession with universals "that seem to pervade much of analytic philosophy (indeed philosophy as a whole),". Duran points out that feminists and pragmatists take little cognizance of universal generalisations and focuses on particulars along with "relations and connections become almost more important than particulars themselves" (1993, 166). Incidentally, postcolonial feminists emphasise that experience in itself is inured by one's cultural context. Ofelia Schutte (2000) states that "the nature of knowledge is not culture-free but is determined by the methodologies and data legitimated by dominant cultures" (40).

As a political and emancipatory exercise, education anchors the relationship between theory and action and as such philosophy of education has been well ensconced in pragmatist philosophy which feminists

write about. Elizabeth Minnich and Jane Roland Martin have criticised the content of curriculum and pedagogy at college level. The conventional academic canon has been brought under scrutiny by them to underscore the power construct that excludes the representation of women and minorities. Especially, Minnich draws attention to the administrative hierarchies of colleges and universities that frequently position women's studies or African-American studies on the margins. In *Transforming Knowledge* (1990), Minnich blends pragmatism and feminism to unveil the patriarchal postulations at the foundation of academics.

Interestingly, Maxine Greene, a major philosopher of education who relied on diverse philosophic traditions, has motivated both educators and philosophers to reconceptualise education as a practice of autonomy and self-determinism: "an opening of spaces" for novel means of intellection and living. Citing the examples of Jane Addams, and also some feminist texts, Greene in *The Dialectic of Freedom* expatiates on the how women have shared truths about their personal and public lives. According to Greene, an educational system must encompass radical diversity welcoming an open space for varied others to make their presence felt in the public world to "tear aside the conventional masks…that hide women's being in the world" (57). Present-day feminists direct their potential to transform the academy as well as culture by rethinking and restructuring our thoughts, the hierarchies of cognition and the social normatives of gender construction. In *The Task of Utopia: Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*, Erin McKenna utilises this process-orientation to build a socio-political philosophy that is receptive of change and not focused on "ends".

John Dewey lays great weightage on social relationships in his philosophy, in the sense of individual to the larger community and not as individual to individual. Individuals "have always been associated together in living, and association in conjoint behavior has affected their relationships to one another as individuals" (1984 [1927], 295), states Dewey. Pragmatist-feminist tradition upholds a sense of community to reassess the meaning of living in a democracy (Green 1999) to create a feminist communitarian philosophy (Whipps 2004) or to rethink of ways of configuring societies. Both Dewey and Addams subscribe to "social ethics" to achieve equality and diversity in community building. In fact, Jane Addams who believed that interdependence leads to evolution, collaboration, and coexistence, attempted to structure communities where associations mushroomed.

## Conclusion

To attain a worthy public life a thrust on a variety of experiences to bring forth truths and the significance of respecting pluralistic perspectives is required and it implies that we rely on relationships with others. Judith Greene in *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, Transformation*, Beth Singer in *Pragmatism, Rights and Democracy,* and Erin McKenna in *The Task of Utopia* and currently many pragmatist-feminists have used these foundations to further their political philosophies. Education alone through critical thinking and social responsibility can effect changes in social constitution. Pragmatist-feminists envision a participatory democracy in which every individual of the society is engaged in community change and development.

Seigfried states that though feminists and pragmatists differ on how they see the Other yet both by acknowledging the diversity of the Other or in the objectification of Others, resist hierarchies framed by sexism, racism and classism. She mentions that pragmatists "are more likely to emphasize that everyone is a significantly and valuably Other … and tend to celebrate otherness by seeking out and welcoming difference as an expression of creative subjectivity" (1996, 267). Contrarily, feminists who have witnessed marginalisation and Otherness as women are drawn to "expose the controlling force exercised by those who have the power to construct the Other as a subject of domination" (Seigfried 1996, 267). This

concerted joint effort of pragmatists and feminists is helping in the realisation of a deeper appreciation of present progressive feminist aims of narrowing the gap between action and theory in a democratic manner. Still gender studies and its pedagogy has a long way to go!

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