Book Review


This philosophically nuanced work examines discourse on ‘women’s question’ with profound theoretical rigour. The book highlights contemporary debate among feminists in the context of post-coloniality. It deconstructs body, gender and identity projected by the feminist standpoint theory and provides critical reflection on inter-sectionality of social construction of ‘body’ and ‘others’ in the context of power relations and scientific rationality. The book enriches our understanding on ‘Third World feminism’ by questioning ‘embodied knowledges’. The author makes an honest effort to delineate ethical priorities in foundational structuring of heterogeneous feminist efforts to question universal forms of knowing and enhances reader’s understanding on power dynamics.

In Chapter 1, the author analyses ‘power’ as ‘the hierarchical construction of subjects’. He starts with Foucault, Althusser and Spivak, and deconstructs Deleuze’s engagement with Foucault’s principal themes of knowledge, power and the nature of subjectivity. The author is inspired by this discourse on state, ‘the power relations are shifting, contingent, unstable and multiple’ (p. 7). He argues that power indicates a process, ‘that constantly flows and shifts its location, its configurations, its points of applications and resistances’ (p. 10). He raises pertinent questions: How to distinguish ideology from truth? Does ideology provide ground for hegemony? The author states, ‘Hegemony is said to occur when space B is made to obey rules of space A without use of coercion or state institution’ (p. 18). Primacy of gender in Anglo-American tradition, popularised by Julian Kristeva, has gained global acceptance over the last 50 years. Thus in women’s studies, there is acceptance of the sex–gender distinction as one of the mainstays of critical analytical tool in feminism (p. 44). Like nature/culture binary, sex refers to biological difference and gender refers to ‘socially constructed’ difference between boys and girls as well as between men and women.

Chapter 2 makes an attempt to address unsolved queries concerning binary—the mind and the body discussed at great length by philosophers like Descartes, Foucault and Derrida. The author aptly remarks, ‘gender roles presuppose a sexed body that acts out roles assigned to it’ (p. 68).
The author, in Chapter 3, delves on the notions of immanence and transcendence—not opposing in separation nor conflating in union. The author asks a mind-boggling question, “How to write (about) death?” And critically examines the role of medicine in conceptualising the phenomenal body. Then he moves from ontology to ethics. He comments on Fox Keller’s notion that ‘relations to the secret are at the heart of scientific revolution and the purported progress, the developments in science’ (p. 94). Fox Keller speaks of the relationship between God/Nature and man/woman and finds roots of male supremacy as an ideological tool to keep women in subordinate position.

Chapter 4 begins with a question, if in the post-modern parlance the body is not one, then how is the body rendered many? While discussing sexual differences as multiple singularities, the author believes that deconstructing discourse on masculinity opens an avenue for feminisation of philosophy. He quotes Irigaray as Spivak reads her in terms of two universals (arising out of sexual difference) and two different ethical worlds. While showing relationship of sexual difference with the struggle for equality of men and women, the author says, ‘the fight for equal rights is not for the same sets of rights’ (p. 123). Feminist literary criticism of Kamal Kumar Majumdar’s Bangla novel Antarjali Jatra in this chapter not only makes a moving tale but also brings to the fore the political economy of sati (p. 127). Yashomati, a Brahmin girl to be married to an old man on the verge of death, exposes patriarchal vested interests in widow burning—the father is relieved of the burden of an unmarried daughter, the Brahmin who conducts the rituals of marriage and sati gets gold and money, and the grown-up sons of Yashomati’s husband get prestige and portion of widow’s property. While dialogic narrative of scheming of the patriarchs is heart-breaking, Baiju, Chandal, whose job is to burn corpse, brings out the humane side. Baiju realises that Yashomati, a widow, is an object of male manoeuvres and rebels against the patriarchs. The author asks, ‘How mind-body binary acts itself out in the reason-emotion dichotomy?’ (p. 130).

Feeling of shame, guilt, helplessness, disgust, consistent with the construction of gendered body are discussed in detail in this chapter with respect to menstruation, child sexual abuse, forced marriage, class, caste, coloniality, religion and other identities. The author discusses these complex issues by giving examples from works of Taslima Nasreen and Jaya Mitra. While discussing valorisation of motherhood, he quotes Spivak and states that ‘family is a machine for the socialisation of female body through affective coding’ (p. 131).

Chapter 5 begins with scrutiny of structuralism, phenomenology and hermeneutics and evaluates politics of location and experience in Third World feminism. He reflects on positions of Julie Stephens (1989) and Chandra Mohanty (1088) and shows the genesis of the construction of ‘Third World woman as a monolith’ (p. 137) that challenged universal sisterhood-many voices one chant. With this came the unfolding of heterogeneous history of struggles based on class, caste, elite-non-elite and race. Cross-cultural studies became trendy in women’s studies. In this backdrop, the author asks, Does category ‘woman’ in its bid to
homogenise in the model of white, western, middle class identity do violence to black women, Third World women or women workers? (p. 142). He talks of location specificity of women in Third World in the twin sense of the cartographic and the historical. He mentions contribution of Janaki Nair, ‘On the Question of Agency in Indian Feminist Historiography’ that advocates feminist viewpoint that sees woman neither as a victim nor as a rebellious heroine but performs ‘negative critical task of unmasking gender-neutral methodologies and the development of a complex and dynamic conception of female agency’ (p. 145). This viewpoint does not treat victimhood and agency in a contradictory mode. The author treats experiences as mediated by discourses and histories. Shefali Moitra’s attempt to classify and categorise general forms of hegemony through patterns of communication ‘speaking to…’ and ‘speaking with …’ the former being Anglo-American tradition and latter being rooted in ‘cognitive anxiety’.

The concluding chapter, titled ‘Towards a Politics of The (Im)possible’, begins with Leninique question, ‘What is to be done?’ This exploration of the dynamics of the production of the ‘body’ with a focus on the ‘others’ (death, sexual difference and colonial experience) provides nuanced understanding on Third World feminism.

Detailed notes and an extensive bibliography enhance the value of this scholarly effort multifold. Scholars interested in gender studies, philosophy, political science, logic, ethics and philosophy will find this theoretically dense book extremely educative in terms of ideological, conceptual and ethical concerns.

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