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Gender and Ethics

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Gender and Ethics: Framing Gender Issues and Questions

Introduction:

At the outset let me clarify that I work in a secular institution within rather secular and sometimes traditional fields such as the Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, broad categories, that are about to be torn down by the interdisciplinary blurring of traditional categories on the one hand and the otherwise pragmatic onslaught of globalization on the other. While I am specifically enthused by the former for its enabling critical process of *de-disciplining* fields of study and scholarship, I am deeply distressed by the latter for its often weak deployment of utilitarianism in what constitutes the form and content of globalization. It is perhaps in the tenuous moment of both the exciting transition of disciplinary critiques causing empowering border-crossing dynamics and the discontent with consumerist and globalizing pragmatics in secular higher education, that I mark my critical location for a sharing of views concerning Gender and Ethics today.

As we acknowledge that no discipline of study, no category of thought, no structure of perception can any longer exclude or opt out of considering gender as a key question and issue for analysis and action—particularly because of the sustained and stirring efforts and struggles of feminist thinkers and activists—we have also to recognize that there is a rather disquieting recuperation of a neo-liberal conservatism that restores gender questions as social commonsense. One hears women students in some of our liberal classrooms call feminism just an "intellectual frill" that amounts to little or nothing in the larger scope of critical thinking; one also listens to demands for more male participation, for male lectures to teach humanities, because there are too many women doing that work, producing an almost skewed neo-biologicism, so systematically contested by feminists the world over. Even if gender is everywhere[1] as we know it is and represent it as such, one is faced with a resurgent denial and submergence of gyno-centricity in the name of private choice of the "gender-neutral" humanist subject[2]. Much after, the Derridean critique of foundationalism and the Foucauldian dismembering of ethics[3], both extremely salutary strategies of thinking, there appears a tendency to deploy these productive process in a felicitous often contradictory style that verges on fetishized traditionalism or on bourgeois laissez-faire. It therefore requires us to break this misplaced critical commonsense by talking, thinking and acting about/on questions of gender *differently*— different from the strategies we have used to conceptualize gender issues and represent gender questions. Hence what I wish to do here is to map and delineate *two* seemingly unconnected issues in our conceptualization and representation of gender-related concerns using certain case studies, often stories of women's experience in our contemporary context. At the end I wish to argue for an altered depiction of gender-related issues as a strategy of intervention in the sexual-politics of contemporary social space.

I

Gender and the Problem of Representation:

There are a variety of social codes and practices that are deployed by ideologies and their agencies to structure together *gender* as key strategy for sustaining patriarchy. Often these are cast and recast in multiple cultural modes in order to maintain the often marginal and sometimes violated place and position of women in our social sphere. Chief among these patriarchal strategies is the covert and /or overt restoration of two most repressive processes of gendering namely, *the regulation of sexual desire* on the one hand and the *exploitation of the woman's body* on the other[4]. This is achieved by a sinister media-driven mechanism of image-building foregrounding women in the public sphere as if there are more women becoming producers of their own destinies; representing women as becoming small entrepreneurs, if not big ones, in charge of their own economic well-being ; women as using freely their creativity to becoming upwardly mobile ;battling away both caste and gender simultaneously; traveling freely with friends, male and female, without either patriarchal regulation or sexually assaulting males, regulating their social mixing; as not bearing their caste-marks[5] and being admitted to professional and non-professional education irrespective of class/ caste position. But while the media produces this image of *the advancing/achieving woman,* they also continue to report contradictorily the rise in crimes against women that are either based on *masculinist regulation* of women's bodies or the *spectacularization* of the women's bodies in the *male gaze*.

I wish to illustrate this point a little further invoking two rather instructive instances of such regulation that uses the method of sexual spectacle. Recently the State had attempted to legislate the banning of women working the night shift as a means of providing security and good governance to its citizens. In its claim it stated that traditionally women never worked the nights and in the now changed circumstances needed to be protected from sexual abuse, assault and sexual harassment including rape and murder. While its intents appear salutary, the state conceptualized the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace and in the public sphere in terms of the normativeness of tradition and culture, of protection from and prevention of male sexual excess on the vulnerability of women; and if we make a Saussurean connection, fore-grounded reductively the woman as mere body. This simultaneously retuned the women to their private household spaces, denying them the right to work within the changed economies of the present. This in every sense contains the woman as spectacle guaranteeing the male gaze its continued power, while restoring the coercive inside of household spaces. By that token, this attempted legislation attempted to re-constitute the nationalist ideal that Pratha Chatterjee in his analysis of the women's questions in nationalism discusses. Chatterjee claims that women's "self-emancipation" had been submerged in the rise of nationalist ideologies as the male anti-colonial combatant restored "feminine virtues" of "housework", "chastity", "devotion" and "self-sacrifice" of upper caste Hinduism as norm of superior "Indian" culture and spirituality[6]. It is precisely this recuperation of the national as a patriarchal preservation and protection of culture and spirituality on the sites of family, kinship and the home that one recognizes in the attempted legislation of the state in the present. What is interesting to note here is how despite globalization with all its fanfare in modernity, ideological spaces continues

to redeploy traditional patriarchy with all its implications in masculinized division of labor

What is more instructive however is how the male fear of female sexuality breeds regulation of the woman's body, and the privatization of women's sexuality as cultural property in the service of a utopian nationalism, controlled by the masculinity of patriarchal agency. The State chooses to constitute the issues of sexuality in the public sphere as matters of the private security of individual women than as questions of gender integral to the patriarchy of the state.

The next instance concerns the interconnection between sexual desire, male violence and female subordination in the conjugal space. In a rather incisive article on the issue of conjugal violence V Geetha[7] argues that often sexual violence on the women's body has been enclosed within the domestic sphere and is often accompanied by the erotics of male power. Most of the time such violence concerns the position the male figure occupies within the space of family, a position often constituted by modes of sexual control and sometimes of economic uncertainty but also of cultural power. It is in fact a complex terrain in which the erotics of "loving…controlling…and possessing the body of the wife" is associated with a "vicious logic of domination" in relation to "family honor" and its attendant ideologies[8]. If one read the case of Renu published in the Times Of India (Dec 29 2006), one is faced with how *suspicion and wife-battering* attend the sexual-politics of inscribing the women's body. The suspicion in this case concerns the economics of class as the money-lender identified apparently is in a higher class position than the husband. Given the caste-mark of the male batterer, there is a further complication that suggests the enclosing/ breaking of caste boundaries. The wife turning hostile at court refusing to name the violator relates to the "self-loathing" and "guilt" that inverts the logic of domination into an affirmation of erotic "interest" and "monogamy"[9]

What is instructive here is the politics of sexual possession being located in the conjugal space. The place of the battered wife is located within the terrain of property and as an object of ownership that deploys a terrorizing eroticism as an expression of male authority. The intersection of caste and class on the site of violence transacts a fundamental burden of sexual labor and regulation on the woman's body submerging as it were female desire through either imagined or real suspicion of sexual promiscuity. Since the conjugal space blurs into the public sphere of economic deprivation and/or success, the family as an institution becomes the space for the development of a sexual economy that divides sexual labor and erotic love as property through the processes of violence authority and control of the woman's body.

What I have attempted to disclose in this segment is the structuring of patriarchal male power, not just in its individual mobilization but in terms of larger system of ideological agency as it sutures together violence and regulation on the female body; the exploitation of the sociality[10] of the women, that is the sum total of her cultural and economic spaces; and the sexual politics of conjugal and kinship spaces as they intersect with questions of caste and class in the contemporary context. What is most visible is that no longer can we talk about gender except through an *altered optic* of perception that includes but de-

aggregates simultaneously the interstices of sexuality, domestic space and the public sphere. In the current context there is otherwise a critical tendency to conflate the one for the other; for often it is in the name of self-emancipation and cultural preservation that some of the worst forms of repression are organized –as in the cases of State legislations, and the domestication of sexual violence earlier analyzed. This in an indirect sense brings us to the politics of representation of gender issues which then begs the question: what should be the analytical optic with which we examine questions of gender? Should we abandon the more universal formulations of gender questions that displace the specificity of our locations and the altered nature of our current context?

II
Fundamentalism and Gender:

In this segment what I wish to consider is the rise of fundamentalism and the way in which it translates sexual-politics in the contemporary context. While we may necessarily assume that Hindutva and its proponents in the ideological agencies carry the political agenda of Hindu Rashtra, *othering,* as it were, of the varied minorities in the Indian nation—which is privileged object of violence— however continues to be vested on the Muslim minority, represented as not belonging here because of its assumed alliance to Pakistan, the nation's closest enemy. As this political discontent and cultural hate brews, one begins to notice the transaction of systematic forms of communal pogroms taking on vastly unprecedented proportions in the nation state. One immediately remembers Godhra 2002 as the hegemonic laboratory of the imagined Hindutva State.

Godhra 2002 is not merely a spontaneous eruption of majoritarian anger against minority arrogance and/or appeasement. It is part of a larger history of Hindutva politics that begins in the interlocking of cultural and political forces in the Ramjanmabhoomi/anti-Mandal movements of the 1990s. It is here that the intellectual rub for feminist thinking in "India" emerges. Let me gesture here one of most central analyzes of the of Hindutva history made by Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in their article titled "Problems for a Contemporary of Gender". Published first in the Social Scientist in 1994, this article on "Indian" feminism's problems to articulate and represent an inclusive analytical optic to represent gender in the changed context of a communalized polity has been repeatedly published for its powerful questioning of upper caste/middle class modes of theorizing gender, without attention to a variety of constituencies, including Islamic women and dalit gendered informants. They locate what may be called an analytical "impasse" in the re-alignments of feminist dynamics and discourses with universalist structures of domination. This participation of autonomous women, not necessarily as "daughters,/wives of their political fathers/husbands as productive self-articulating and self-recognizing agents of their subjectivity and power in political movements produces the "feminist subject" still marked by a radical right wing "humanism" and situated within the class/caste/community axis. In other words there as been a displacement of the politics of the upper caste/middleclass axis onto the universalized feminist subject that recognizes middle class/ upper caste women as the "authentic bearers of secularism and egalitarianism"[10] Thus there has been communal class and caste *othering* of Islamic women of dalit women well within the feminist project in contemporary India. Hence one

can only revisit the highly differentiated nature of gendering and hence the need for a highly differentiated optic of gender analysis.

If in the Ramjanmabhoomi movement constituted the enemy within as the lustful Islamic male ever eager to violate upper caste Hindu women and therefore requiring a productive fight to protect the national ethos from foreign corruption, Godhra 2002 shifts the focus back on the "bystander" women in a variety of forms: in the embodiments of disempowering excuse or tacit approval and sometime vocal support of carnage of Islamic women by such individual women political leaders, parliamentarians and marginally by the NHRC [11].The problem as been further complicated by the amenability of dalit and adivasi groups to "dangerous and often violent" forms of Hindutva[12] Somehow there has been a temporal abandoning of the Ambedharkite model of strengthening the "ameliorative" guarantees of the post colonial state[13] Hence we may have to form modes of analysis that interrogate the "hidden structuring"[14] of the feminist subject within a fundementalized context.

There are just two points I wish to make in what this hidden structuring entails. There has been a clear masculinization of Islam as the opposing other of the uppercase/middle class feminist subject which in many ways both lumps the productive Islamic community with the fundamentalist fringes of its own community; and it also encloses the emerging feminist subject within the Islamic community in its own patriarchy. This process within the Indian context is produced by the displacement of a Universalized feminist optic that encounters its limits in the contemporary politics of its representation. That apart, it is more than just visible, as Sharmila Regge puts it, that dalit women talk differently from there upper caste counterparts[15] and western metropolitan feminists. Hence it is impossible to formulate a feminist praxis that transgresses questions of caste, class and community

Concurrently after 9/11 in the Anglo-American world the notion of Islam and its community has shifted from the earlier skewed tolerance of backwardness and tradition to a more active characterization of the community and region as enemies of modernity, freedom and humanity. If one considers the representation of West Asia as deserving modernist self-emancipation from the throes of traditionalist Islam, one discovers the voluntarist sympathy towards women behind the veil marking them as saddened remnants of an ancient regime of female purity. What is certainly not being represented is how the veil itself is not necessarily an Islamic construct but an ethno-Arabic product with a variety of functions, not always regulatory or protectionist but used to inform an aesthetic of dance music and culture. That it is being mobilized by fringe fundamentalists now as a regulatory mechanism of certain triumphalist traditionalism in opposition to a flattened consumerist culture that totalizes rather than differentiates deserves to be engaged in. How then do we talk about the immigrant women in Europe being arrested for wearing their veil in public as it attacked the secular credentials of European nations? Hence the project of Islamiization of specific geographies of the real and the imagined is structured on the masculinization of the Islamic peoples by Western discourses of power In other words the west feminizes its wars on terror in the name of liberating West Asia from the masculinist clutches of tyranny, traditionalism and fundamentalism.

What once again emerges is that in the discursive process of cultural re-definition, the metropolis continues to enclose the Islamic patriarchies within their own traps of punitiveness and regulation of the woman's body as in the manner of Talibanization of West Asia. Little is often focused on Islamic women producing their own subjectivity by restoring their own subjectivities in the call to prayer, severely monitored till now by the traditional ullama [16] This by far is why we are often unable to engage questions of forced sex-work of minor children in Iran and the punitive nature of its regulatory authority as the complicate terrain is undisclosable in the vicious logic of western domination on the one hand and local patriarchy on the other. Hence the representation of Islam and its communities would need to be analyzed in the interstices of the material process of political domination and the localized repressive regulation of female sexuality.

Fundamentalisms thus have had a habit of re-occupying ancient cultural history deploying them as regulatory processes of female sexuality and desire. Often this is in the service of nationalist ideals be it Hindutva or in real or imagined Islamic nations or in the scope of terror in the American neo-liberal state. Thus in this sense gendering is perhaps the foremost terrain on which any of the other forms of repression and domination are structured as in caste, race and class axis earlier analyzed; and in the terrains of religion, nationality, the public and private spheres. What we thus is see that the impossible subject[17] of female presence is heavily underwritten by the politics of sexual regulation of the women's body, the social violation of female desire and the political exclusion of material marginality.

What then is the place of engendering ethics within both the epistemologies of male power and the historiographies of tradition and modernity? Should we then continue to argue for a temporality of contexts as against the stability of universalities? Is it at all possible to narrativize an ethical frame that will represent women as autonomous subjects of their destinies?

III

Conclusion: Rethinking the Frames of Engendering Ethics:

I wish to conclude by rather calling attention to three processes that could reframe processes of engendering ethics.

The first concerns the conflictual terrain of narrativizing the history of female sexuality in terms of its domination and repression. Since most of the global forms of structural violence through religious fundamentalism and other categories such as caste, class, race and nationality are material to historiography, feminist thinking may need to re-occupy by contestation and critiques those ancient histories that are used for purposes of repression and domination of the women's bodies rather than produce counter-lineages of smaller histories. While this might run counter to the progressive thinking in favor of temporality and contextuality and against grand narratives of ethics and stability, I find the formulation of particularly Hayden White who conceptualizes historicity as ultimately living within the ethical terrain of the cultural and social moral is deeply resonant [18]. Hence what is perhaps more productive is to interrogate patriarchal histories in an

attempt to insert temporalities and contexualities of women's stories as integral to ancient histories.

The second processes concern the restoration of the increased relevance of specific ethnographies, autobiographies, testimonies of women in their self-articulation and self-recognition as gendered presences; and define from there the ethic of justice on behalf of womens' place and position in contemporary contexts. I have in mind here the analytical optics of theorists such as V Geetha , Sharmila Regee and Mary E. John in the mode of focusing gender as a problematic, not in its static and dialectical sense, but as questions concerning the woman's body than as merely a terrain of theory. In other words one may need to revisit the documentary process and instruments rather than formulate theories about theories thus forcing a re-engagement with the dynamics of patriarchy. This then will refer to the epistemology of ethics as it is represented in current critical thinking.

The third and final proposition is to seriously consider the question of difference as it is mobilized by different constituencies like the dalit, the racialized and the class-based. That various constituents and agents of female subjects talk differently about their location and absences should occupy a central terrain of social and political inclusiveness in the production of gender justice in the future.

Thank you

Notes and References

1. The term as come to stand for an understanding of not just of economic practice but for a systematic discourse that breeds a new ideology of economic and social power. For further details see, Steger, Manfred Globalization: The New Market Ideology New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004
2. I have drawn this from a book on colonialism which explains the marginalization of the already marginalized. See, Viswanathan, Gauri Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India New Delhi: OUP, 1998
3. Cited Taylor , Sainath, P A, " How The Better Half Dies" The Hindu, July 31 2005
4. Sainath, P A, " How The Better Half Dies" The Hindu, July 31 2005
5. ibid.
6. ibid
7. ibid
8. ibid
9. Dietrich, Gabriele, " Effects Of IMF/WB Policies On Women In India" In Muricken, Ajit (ed) Globalization And SAP Trends and Impact: An Overview Mumbai: Vikas Adyayan Kendra, 1997
10. ibid
11. ibid
12. ibid