

THE STATUS OF FEMINIST THEORY IN MALAYSIA

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Introduction

The evaluation of feminist theory is a reflexive study of the field. The focus is less the subject matter of women and gender relations and more that of theory itself. This paper represents an attempt to assess the theoretical contribution of gender studies in Malaysia to feminist theory. It amounts, therefore, to determining the theoretical status of gender studies in Malaysia.¹

In assessing any discipline or field we are called upon to delineate the subject matter that falls within the scope of the assessment. The reflexive study of gender studies may take up many problems that range from epistemological to more empirical ones, as well as from cognitive to more practical ones. They may involve the study of the epistemological basis of gender studies, methodology, the underlying structure of theory, the policy implications of feminist theory, and the value postulates of feminist theory. Not all these aspects of meta-analysis can be covered in this paper. Its scope is restricted to the following concerns:

- (i) Social reality, in its objective, subjective, macro and micro dimensions can be apprehended by means of various theoretical perspectives such as ethnomethodology, phenomenology, structural Marxism, psychoanalysis and so on. Are theories from a wide variety of theoretical traditions applied to the study of gender in Malaysia?
- (ii) In the study of gender in Malaysia are new theoretical insights being developed?

- (iii) Have works that have been generated in the study of non-Malaysian societies been applied and refined in negotiating the Malaysian data?

By keeping these questions in mind it will be possible to gain some insight into the degree to which works on gender in Malaysia are theoretically reflexive. The extent to which these works refute, extend, integrate, and improve upon received theory is the issue at hand. While descriptive works may be informed by theory, this is not to say that they are theoretically self-conscious. We shall have occasion to illustrate this point later on.

This paper proceeds with an overview of feminist theory. This is followed by a brief commentary on Malaysian works on gender by way of addressing their theoretical content. Finally, the importance of both descriptive and theoretical work in the context of the call to indigenization of the social sciences is discussed.

The Varieties of Feminist Theory

Women's relative powerlessness, their subordination, their "minority" status, and oppression represent forms of being that persist in remaining conspicuous in the modern world. - Feminist scholars, in their bid to present a broad-ranging system of ideas with which to explain and understand social behaviour, institutions, and the social reconstruction of reality from a feminocentric point of view, have developed a rich body of theory and research. All knowledge is perspectival and feminists seek to add to the plethora of points of view by informing theory with an authentic representation of the lived experience of women. Feminist scholars have laboured to produce a variety of theoretical perspectives that we will attempt to inventory shortly.²

Feminist discourse can be said to be expressed in terms of theories of gender difference, inequality and oppression. The variety of theories that fall within each of these broad categories can be listed as follows:

- 1) biosocial theories of difference
- 2) institutional explanations of difference
- 3) phenomenological theories of difference
- 4) socialization theories of difference
- 5) liberal feminism
- 6) Marxist feminism
- 7) psychoanalytic theories of oppression
- 8) radical feminism
- 9) socialist feminism
- 10) postmodernist theories

Theories of Gender Differences

The central concern of feminist literature informed by theories of gender differences is that the inner psychic life of women is different from that of men.³ The dimensions over which men and women differ include basic values and interests, achievement motives, literary creativity, sexual fantasies, and personal identity.⁴ These differences are often explained in terms of biological, institutional or social-psychological factors.

An example of a biological explanation is found in the works of Alice Rossi (1979; 1983) who relates differences in biological function between males and females to hormonally determined development in the life-cycle. Such hormonal differences are held to account for variations in various traits that show up in childhood.

Institutional explanations of gender differences consider women's function in child-bearing and caring as a prime determinant of the sexual division of labour linking women to the private sphere of the home and the family. Although the separate spheres for men and women are understood within the broader context of sexual inequality or oppression (Bernard, 1983; Ruddick, 1980), the primary concern is with the institutional roots of gender differences (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988: 295).

Social psychological explanations of gender take the form of phenomenological and socialization theories. Phenomenological theories focus on how the typifications of maleness and femaleness pattern the taken-for-granted knowledge of everyday life, on how these typifications are maintained, and on the way in which such collective work defines the spheres and psychological profiles of men and women (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). Socialization theories, on the other hand, look into the social learning experiences that condition young children for the separate male and female roles and spheres to which they become linked (Stockard & Johnson, 1980).

Theories of Gender Inequality

Theories of gender inequality comprise of two streams of thought - liberal feminism and Marxist feminism. What they have in common is the view that women do not just occupy a different location in society but that they have unequal access to wealth, status and power in relation to men. This inequality does not result from biological, institutional or social-psychological differences between men and women but from the nature of society.

According to liberal feminism (Bird, 1979; Friedan, 1963, 1981; Janeway, 1981; Lipman-Blumen, 1985), gender inequality is a result of the sexual division of labour and the existence of the separation between the private and public spheres of social life. Socialization prepares children to assume adult roles primarily in the public sphere if they are males and the private sphere if they are females. The true rewards of social life, therefore, only accrue to men as it is only in the public sphere that wealth, status, power, and self-realization are forthcoming (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988: 296). This state of affairs is perpetuated through the instrumentality of the ideology of sexism. All this can be undone by means of socialization whereby the family, school and mass media play their parts in challenging sexism and breaking the will to rigidly define sex roles.

Marxist feminism applies class analysis to the issue of gender inequality, the most famous presentation of this stance having been made by Marx and Engel.⁵ Gender inequality is understood in the context of the rise of private property, class society and the sexual division of labour. The class location of women is determined by their entry to or exclusion from capitalist relations of production and their social and biological contributions to the reproduction of the working class (Hammam, 1982: 5). The male bourgeoisie owns the means of production and organization while the female bourgeoisie itself is the property of the males (Rubin, 1975). In return for bearing male offspring who inherit the socio-economic resources of the father, women are rewarded with luxurious lifestyles. Working-class women, on the other hand, obtain lower wages and are a source of profit for the capitalist class as well as an important component of the reserve labour force (Gardiner, 1979; Mackinnon, 1982).

Theories of Gender Oppression

The central theme of theories of gender oppression is that women's location in society is a result of a power relationship between men and women in which men control, subjugate and oppress women. The basic structure of domination is patriarchy (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1988: 303). Patriarchy is not a derived consequence of biological, institutional or other factors but is a structure of domination constituted by deliberate intention.⁶ There are four varieties of theories of gender oppression -psychoanalytic feminist theory, radical feminism, socialist feminism and postmodernist feminist theory.

Psychoanalytic feminist theory explains the oppression of women in terms of the emotional need of men to dominate women as a consequence of a male neurosis deriving from the fear of death and an ambivalent attitude towards the mothers who raised them. Men are less successful in dealing with the idea of mortality and death because they are not as intimately and directly involved in procreation and child-rearing as women are. Men channel their energies into objectifications that outlast them such as art, architecture, wealth,

weapons, science and religion, all of which become arenas in which men dominate women (Al-Hibri, 1981; Chodorow, 1978; Kittay, 1981).

Radical feminism stresses patriarchy as a social system which perpetuates oppression and violence against women from economic exploitation to rape, sexual harassment, sadism in pornography, and so on. This approach holds that Marxist theory is of utility only in terms of explaining the location of women in the work place but fails to illuminate the emotional and sexual dynamics that characterize the life experiences of wives and mothers (Hatem, 1987: 813).

Radical feminists recognise the autonomy of gender from class. Transformations in the mode of production are not necessarily accompanied by changes in the system of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a violence perpetrated by men and by organizations controlled by men. It represents a fundamental mode of power wielding which permeates all arenas of society such as motherhood, heterosexuality, monogamy, gynaecology, psychotherapy, unremunerated housework, and so on (Dworkin, 1976; Griffin, 1978; 1981; Millet, 1970; Rich, 1976).

Socialist feminism draws attention to how macro-social structures such as the economy, politics and ideology interact with macro-social processes such as reproduction, domesticity and sexuality. Although influenced by Marxism, they do not restrict their analysis to class inequality and stress the role of ideology in the oppression of women (Frye, 1983; Smith, 1979).

Postmodernist theories of gender are concerned with the manner in which the construction of knowledge wields power and feeds into gender hierarchies. Being a relatively new approach, let us consider one variant of postmodernist theory to be found in the works of Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, the analysis of power can no longer take law, prohibition, and state power as the model. Power is not to be understood in terms of prohibition, that is, in negative terms. In its positive forms, power is also wielded discursively, and this takes place not "apart from or against power, but in the very space and as a means of its exercise" (Foucault, 1980: 32). The understanding of

power cannot be restricted to prohibition, restriction, punishment, and blockage. The organization and formation of discourse is related to the wielding of power. There are three procedures through which discursive power is wielded.

First, the external procedures of exclusion include prohibition, division and rejection, and the opposition between true and false (Foucault, 1981: 52-54). Secondly, there are the internal procedures of control that function as "principles of classification, of ordering, of distribution... (Ibid: 56). These involve principles such as the commentary, the author, and the discipline, whereby discourses exercise their own control and limitation. There are also procedures of control that are neither external nor internal and which determine the "condition of their [discourses] application, of imposing a certain number of rules on the individuals who hold them, and thus of not permitting everyone to have access to them" (Ibid: 61). The control and limitation this time is of the speaking subject. No one participates in the order of discourse without being qualified or without satisfying certain requirements. Such procedures are the rituals, societies of discourse, and the doctrines (Ibid: 62-63).

Interpretation, according to Foucault, leads to the normalization and disciplinary control of man. The groundlessness of texts points to the arbitrariness of interpretation and its imposition upon others. Discourses are organized so that they exercise power through the procedures that arise from discourses. Therefore, power is not to be understood merely in terms of the subservience of citizens to the state or the domination of one group by another. It is more than just repression (Foucault, 1980: 92).

Let us consider sexuality as a transfer point for the relations of power (Foucault, 1978: 103). In the nineteenth century there was a proliferation of the discourses on sex that set out to formulate the truth of sex, for it is sex that underlies conduct and existence, being a "universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends" (Foucault, 1978: 69). The hermeneutic function of verifying this obscure truth lies with the psychoanalyst. This verification is the will to truth that Foucault wants to alert us to. When a domain

"susceptible to pathological processes" is identified there arises the will to look for the secret, underlying forces at work. Once the truth of sex is discovered that which does not conform is declared false. Hence the institutions that engage-in therapy and normalization (Ibid: 68).

Normalization processes involving individuals and populations are constituted by the disciplinary control of individuals effected at the discursive level by fields such as psychoanalysis, medicine, pedagogy, as well as other technical and scientific fields.⁷

Gender Studies in Malaysia

From the above it is quite evident that gender studies is a theoretically rich field of research having been nourished by a number of traditions in the social sciences and humanities. Can we say the same of gender studies in Malaysia? We will address this issue bearing in mind the question of the application of a wide variety of theoretical traditions, the development of new theoretical insights and the relevance of works that have been generated in the study of non-Malaysian societies to the Malaysian setting.

Theories of gender differences that have as their central concerns biological, institutional, and social-psychological explanations of gender differences are rarely encountered in the Malaysian literature. Exceptions are the works of Wazir Jahan Karim on socialization processes in the context of the impact of Islamic revival and industrialization on Malay marriage and family (Karim, 1987), and that of Fatimah Abdullah on role conflict among Malay women. Patterns of socialization in Malay society initiate young girls into traditional roles which come into conflict with those that emerge with rapid social change (Fatimah Abdullah, 1985). In application here are various concepts such as role-strain, role-sets and role-conflict. It is a work which applies the theory of role-strain to Kuala Lumpur data without an accompanying concern with the refinement or development of theory. Having said that, the work has revealed interesting aspects of role-conflict that would be of use to researchers and policy-makers

alike.

Many works in Malaysian gender studies on gender inequality are inspired by Marxist feminist or class theory. Nevertheless, we do not find here attempts to refine theory in the context of Malaysian data. For example, a number of Marxist feminist concepts such as sexual reproduction, patriarchal ideology, and the gender division of labour have been utilised to explain economic and social inequality between men and women (Maznah Mohamad, 1984; Ng, 1986; Ng et al, 1987; O'Brien, 1984; Couillard, 1990; Manderson, 1979; Fatimah Halim, 1983). Nevertheless, these concepts are not encountered theoretically because they are not problematised and brought into question. It would, however, be far from the truth to suggest that these work are of no pedagogical or research value.

It should also be noted that there are works that are thoroughly descriptive in nature although some claim to theoretical grounding is made. For example, the statement to the effect that wage differentials between male and female workers are part of the logic of capitalism (Amarjit Kaur, 1986: 13-14) needs to be unpacked, examined, elaborated and, if necessary, refashioned. The statement has to be more than just made. We cannot assume that in Malaysia women's wages are lower because the logic of the system is such that the cost of maintaining a family is not factored into their wages. What needs to be examined, among other things, are the other factors determining wage differentials and the resultant theoretical implications. There is a failure of mediation between theory and data.⁸

Postmodernist theories of gender oppression have found their way into Malaysian studies as well. Worthy of mention is the work of Karim which draws upon postmodernist insights but is at the same time wary of Eurocentrism, suggesting that the "Foucauldian notion of power and gender may be inapplicable in cultures which concretize relationships between men and women through relationships of bilaterality" (1992: 7). This work is self-consciously theoretical because it attempts to encounter theory and history with a critical reflexivity that ultimately enriches both. In the works of Aihwa Ong (1987; 1990), however, the claim that Foucault's methods and ideas

are applied needs to be examined. An application of Foucault's work to the study of women factory workers in Malaysia would detail how the various discourses of transnational corporations, government, and the sciences, deploy procedures of control and limitation as discursive power is wielded over these women. Ong did not reveal the technologies of power and the processes of normalization and disciplinary control that characterise discourses. Again, this is not to denigrate the quality of the research itself, regardless of theoretical claims.

Feminist Theory and the Call to Indigenization

All research and writing in the human sciences are ultimately grounded in theory even if they are largely descriptive. Much of the Malaysian literature is of this nature. It must be stressed again that this is not to understate the need for such works. The works of Azizah Kasim (1974; 1984; 1986; 1989), Jamilah Ariffin (1981; 1987; 1989; 1992), Rohana Ariffin (1986), Rokiah Alavi (1989a; 1989b), Rokiah Talib (1986), Sharifah Zaleha (1986) and Zaidah Mustapha (1985), in addition to those cited above have added to the rich body of literature on women and gender studies in Malaysia. What needs to be developed now is theoretical self-consciousness which involves a number of tasks.

Theory has to be critically assessed with its epistemological and cultural assumptions laid bare. It then needs to be creatively applied to the data at hand. The application of theory is more than just a recasting of data in new terminology. The nature of the data should invite us to see theory in a new light and to allow it to assume new forms. At the same time, the dialectic between theory and data should offer new vantage points from which to observe social reality. This sums up what is often termed as relevant social science as well as what has come to be known as the indigenization of the social sciences. Because the context of feminist theory is often Western cultural and historical contexts the question of relevance and fit does arise. Indigenization refers to the grounding of the human and social sciences in indigenous philosophies, epistemologies and histories. It recognizes

the culture-specific location of society as well as sources of theory other than that of the Western corpus of knowledge and wisdom (Alatas, 1993). Indigenization may be carried out at a number of levels, ranging from the critical analysis of the philosophical assumptions underlying science, to the generation of concepts and theories from indigenous historical experiences and cultural practices, to policy-making involving the specification of locally sensitive policies and programmes and their implementation (Alatas, 1993:312).⁹ Also of importance in indigenization is the appropriation of works from other non-Western societies that may be of relevance to our setting.

Feminist theory is no stranger to indigenization. Among efforts to ground knowledge in indigenous histories and cultural experiences is that of feminist ecology (Manzo, 1991). Its articulator, an Indian physicist Vandana Shiva (1989), questions the universality of the category of technological man which tends to turn women and nature into passive objects. The implications of her work are that local or indigenous knowledge needs to be taken seriously as the philosophical assumptions that inform development theory have been responsible for violence, death, and ecological destruction (Manzo, 1991: 26).

Feminist theory in Malaysia stands to be enriched by a perspective that privileges indigenization in the scheme of things. For example, bringing theories of class and patriarchy to bear upon the question of *adat perpatih*¹⁰ among the Malays of Negeri Sembilan would involve the creative application of these theories. The resultant modification of these theories may prove to be of interest to those who are studying similar questions in other regions of the world. Indeed it would be interesting to see the emergence of feminist theory grounded in the historical and cultural experiences of *adat* society.

Karim's work on *adat* and Islam relates to indigenization at a more fundamental level for it involves the critique of Eurocentrism in anthropology, the distinction between valid method and inappropriate ideas, and an expose of the superimposition of Western knowledge constructions upon indigenous knowledge systems, while at the same time being immersed in Malay data (1992: 3-4).

Indigenization at yet another level calls for the consideration of works in other non-Western societies that may be of relevance to local concerns. The study of Islam and women in Malaysia would obviously benefit if there was more exposure to theoretical debates in Middle Eastern gender studies.¹¹

Feminist theorists are raising the same problems as Third World social scientists. These relate to the question of value-laden social science, the problem of objectivity, the shortcomings of positivist epistemologies, the passing off of gender or class-centred knowledge as universal, and the search for non-Eurocentric stances in the social sciences. The emergence of Malaysian or Third World feminist theory, however, involves a double movement away from both Eurocentric as well as male-centred social science.¹² Woman reflects upon herself not only as woman but as a Third World subject. There is, therefore, a dual participation in theory and practice, as Third World intellectual and emancipated woman.

Having said that, feminist theorizing is no more the exclusive domain of woman than indigenous theorizing is that of Third World social scientists. Our goal is not phallocentrism in reverse and the call to indigenized feminist theory is simultaneously a call to the universalization of the social sciences.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is concerned almost exclusively with locally produced works on gender in Malaysia. The contributions of others such as Rosemary Firth, Heather Strange, and Maila Stevens are not dealt with. The reason for this exclusion is more logistical than anything else, but the need to assess indigenously produced works is, I think, defensible. Due to time constraints I have also excluded unpublished works. It should be noted that this is not meant to be an exhaustive study of feminist works on Malaysia. Rather, what I have set out to do is to suggest some theoretical problems involved in the study of women and gender in Malaysia.

- ² The typology of perspectives used here is largely derived from Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley (1988). For other typologies see Jagger & Rothenberg (1984), Lengermann & Wallace (1985) and Sokoloff (1980).
- ³ Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley (1988: 293)
- ⁴ Ruddick (1980), Gilligan (1982), Kaufmann & Richardson (1982), Gilbert & Gubar (1979), Hite (1976), Laws & Schwartz (1977) and Kasper (1986).
- ⁵ *The Origins* (Engels, 1970) was published by Engels in 1884 but was based on notes written by Marx prior to his death in 1883.
- ⁶ For more on patriarchy see Mernissi (1975; 1982).
- ⁷ For more on post-modernism and feminism see Bordo (1989) and Diamond & Quinby (1988). For a critique of a feminist appropriation of Foucault see Lloyd (1993).
- ⁸ This is also true of Tan (1986).
- ⁹ Needless to say, indigenization does not involve the rejection of Western social science. We are not suggesting that feminists go native or engage in orientalism in reverse (Amin, 1989; Moghadam, 1989; Abaza & Stauth, 1990).
- ¹⁰ On *adat perpatih* see Azizah Kassim (1974; 1989).
- ¹¹ See, for example, Abdo (1991; forthcoming), Hatem (1987), Al-Hibri (1982), Mernissi (1975; 1982; 1987), Moghadam (1991; forthcoming).
- ¹² For a taste of the latter see Elliot (1975), Farganis (1989), Molyneux (1977) and Nash (1975).

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