

FEMINISM AND EMPOWERMENT

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Introduction

The question of what is, or should be, an appropriate feminist discourse is still a matter of much debate within Western feminism, especially in academic circles. In these on-going debates, even the conventional way of marking the divisions - liberal, Marxist, socialist and radical feminisms - is either replaced or juxtaposed with a less familiar typification of differing feminist discourses: "cultural feminism", "eco-feminism", "feminist empiricism", "feminist standpoint epistemologies", "feminist postmodernism" "postcolonial feminism", "Black feminism", etc. Moreover, these debates when they are staged have also to contend not only with the usual anti-feminist criticisms and the problems of the "academic-activist" divide, but with the all too familiar implications of funding, personality and ideology that plague all political meetings. These make a critique of feminist discourse/politics (for that matter, any political practice/discourse) a highly complicated affair. All the more difficult, then, to approach the inquiry of this paper, which is, do these contemporary debates, regarding appropriate and effective feminist politics, have any import for a "feminist political discourse from a Malaysian perspective"?

My aim is to show some of the crucial insights of the contemporary feminist debates and what they can or cannot bring to the discussion of a possible "feminist discourse from a Malaysian perspective", more specifically a feminist discourse which can assist in delineating the ways of power and emancipation. I believe that Malaysian feminists, or activists in women's organizations, are in general striving for a wide range of new rights for women and at the same time, committed to a political project whose aim is to struggle against

the forms of subordination which exist in many social relations, not only in those linked to gender. It is also apparent that factionalization of sorts exist - not only for reasons of funding, personality and ideological competitions - but because of the need to reconcile the differing discourse-standpoints viz. the necessity, on the one hand, to strive for new rights for women within the given socio-political community and, on the other hand, the need to challenge the dominant male-model of membership and politics within this particular socio-political community. What I wish to demonstrate is that this is exactly the same predicament of differing political standpoints so characteristic of the "second-wave" feminism, with which western feminists and feminist scholarship are engaged. The difference is that, in the West, there is a more intense discussion/debate on the issues. The reflections afforded by these current western feminist debates cannot but contribute to similar Malaysian-feminist deliberations on the conditions for creating an effective equality of women and the forms of feminist politics.

The approach I take is to discuss these significant feminist contributions in the context of what is commonly known as the "crisis and impasse of representation in social theory" of the late twentieth century. This latter phenomenon refers to the many unresolved and fundamental epistemological challenges directed at the Western tradition of social inquiry and the presumed relations between power and knowledge or theory and practice. What constitutes knowledge of society, politics and societal change? With what theoretical framework(s) can we identify a process of emancipation when looking at social relations over time? Social inquiry is challenged, and rightly so, to bring together the classical teleological end of politics - a good and just life (Aristotle) - with the demand of scientific discipline upon social science - which is to attain accurate knowledge of the operations of society (Habermas, 1973). Is this prospect attainable or do we subscribe, at the end of the day, to the notion that "the last word of social theories or ideologies, is [often] apocalypse" (Pieterse, 1989: 353); that "God is dead, Man is dead and social science has never lived"? (Bertaux, 1981: 43); that the pursuit of "innocent knowledge" to "reconcile... theory and practice" is as hopeless as the Enlightenment search for universal truth (Flax, 1992:447). Feminism,

as a body of diverse and critical thought which has developed in the West, has contributed significantly to challenging and undermining the western traditions of the European Enlightenment and its production of epistemic relativities in western social science and social theory as we have inherited it. As such it is an inaccuracy to generalize feminism which has developed in the West and the contemporary feminist debates as "western" and fail to appreciate its contributions to women everywhere against sexism which is everywhere.

Contrary to popular perceptions, "postmodernism", however it is misunderstood, is neither the forerunner nor epitome of the critical project against the philosophical tenets of the Enlightenment. As Chantal Mouffe (1992) has pointed out, the "critique of universalism, humanism and rationalism has come from many different quarters and it is far from being limited to the authors called "poststructuralists" or "postmodernists" (Mouffe, 1992:369). Heidegger, Gadamer, the later Wittgenstein and the American pragmatists are but a few harbingers who typify the progressive questioning, through the twentieth century, of the "idea of a universal human nature, of a universal canon of rationality through which that human nature could be known as well as the traditional conception of truth" (Mouffe, 1992: 369). However, while philosophical inquiry has been given these shots-in-the-arm via the purgings of such assumptions as "metaphysical realisms", "objectivism", "epistemological individualism", "rationalism", "universalism", or "foundationalism", by existentialists, post-Marxists, pragmatists and poststructuralists, feminists have questioned a more primary element of the Cartesian heritage in western thought - the rational, universal, transhistorical man-subject/knower (Jaggar, 1989). Feminist scholarship has further advanced this critique by engaging Marxist historicism, psychoanalytic theory, literary theory and sociology of knowledge to point out the still residual and persistent male-epistemic privilege even in such knowledge-reconstructions of neo/post-Marxists. Adding fuel to the fire, critics have included compulsory heterosexuality to the coercive social structure generating partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life. (Harding, 1991: 1). Biologism, naturalism, universalism - these are conceptual commitments which are not only

ahistorical (they predicate fixed attributes on social relations), but politically justify these "given fixities" as "inherent limitations to social change" (Grosz, 1990:335).

Feminist criticism has not only challenged the false ontology of the social order created by the western bourgeois male-epistemic rationalising, but questioned the very fundamental and concrete implications of this institutionalised metaphysics. Millman and Kanter (1987), for instance, demonstrate the methodological implications of such an ontology which recreates its inherent inadequacies in its research findings and policy-implications¹. Perhaps an appropriate example in political science of a post-enlightenment social-theory construct, built upon this abstracted ontological subjectivity which appropriated all other subjects, is the sphere of civil society. Whether as the domain of liberty for the market-regulated, privately controlled, or voluntarily organized "true source and theatre of history", or the social movementist's constellation of juxtaposed and changing elements or the "life-world", the "civil society" allows only for such subjects as was defined with and for it².

"Civil society", the apparent achievement of the western political tradition, a "panopticon" - to use a Foucauldian appropriation of Bentham adopted to measure, if not characterize, the processes of objectifying, observing, identifying, defining and categorising, for the purposes of acting upon, using, subjecting to work, transforming, thus exploiting the intended production of consequences. Thus, social inquiry, informed by this so-called "epistemological emancipation" inevitably serves to reproduce the exclusionary practices of Enlightenment's humanism, universalism and rationalism. In terms of non-western societies, the historical projects of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism enabled the translation of this ideological construct onto those polities. The concepts of modernisation -- the nation-state, civil society revisited, citizenship, the familiar notions of socio-political domains and other dualistic notions of secular and religious, public and private, all seem to be inadequate, if only for the fact that they are invented and exclusionary categories that need to be politically stretched to analyse non-western societies. At the same time these concepts articulate social, political and economic

relations in apparently neutral but gendered terms, as well as lump together very different sectors of society into *a priori* concepts. Thus, as is the general practice in the academy, scholarship on the socio-political or economic processes if they ever consider the woman question, assign an area in the field of inquiry inconsequential to the processes being studied. Gender relations are "neutralized" into the male perspective or, at best, relegated to a field of specialized study secondary to the so-called larger political process.

Even post-Marxist revisions and critical theory, albeit sensitive to the critical questions pertaining to societal and political transformation put forward by, among others, the new social movements when they rejected Parsonian functionalism, did not really shift the attention from the problem of order to the neglected problematic of the androcentric categories of analysis. Critical theory, in the same vein as neo-Marxist contributions, did strongly stimulate the debate on societal change but the actual analysis of societal and political change in all its myriad convergences, not least the gender differences, was still neglected. Nancy Fraser (1989), for instance, points out why Habermas' work remains relatively untouched by the outpouring of feminist criticism and, as a result, he presupposes rather than challenges dualistic, ideological ways of counterposing such concepts as the family, economy, private and public spheres, symbolic reproduction, material reproduction, system and lifeworld (Fraser, 1989:8).

Feminist social criticism, therefore, argues that it is not sufficient that women strive for new rights within a given socio-political community without at the same time challenging the dominant liberal, socialist or radical-democratic models of membership and politics. The current and extant conceptions of the political, they demonstrate, are basically male and women's concerns must necessarily be compromised or discounted before being accommodated within such frameworks. If anything, feminism as developed in the West has exposed the pretensions of a western, bourgeois, male rationality and the implications to social discourse and political practice. The varied strands of feminism have brought their distinct agendas into socio-political research. It is women-

centred in the sense of raising questions about women and aiming to provide women with helpful answers regarding sexism in the production of meaning and knowledge. By sexism is meant the neglect, if not exclusion, of women as subjects and subject matter, referring to them only in terms of their relationships with men, making unwarranted and false assumptions about their different nature or subsuming them in what are in fact generalizations about men.

In recent years, however, these feminist assessments of "malestream" social theory have come under serious criticism from within feminist circles itself especially from postcolonial, Black, Third-World or minority feminists (Gunew, 1991; Butler & Scott, 1992). Briefly put, the main charge is: has the aforementioned feminist criticism, in displacing the invariable white-bourgeois-universal-rational-male categories in social discourse, posited in its place an equally deficient and universalist-essentialist "woman" knower/subject? If the feminist epistemological project is intrinsically and intimately bound up with the concerns, interests and experiences of women, as it is claimed, then does the analytical category "woman" do justice to the concrete differences among women in terms of class, geo-politics, culture and sexuality? Or is it a new universalism suggesting only the commonness of all women at all times and in all social contexts? For many mainstream feminists, however, if women cannot be perceived as a coherent identity, it is not possible to ground a feminist political movement in which "women could unite as women in order to formulate and pursue specific feminist aims" (Mouffe, 1992: 371). In other words, to acknowledge the "contingency and ambiguity of every identity, renders feminist action impossible" (Mouffe, 1992: 371).

Underlying this contemporary feminist controversy is the familiar issue of what is or should be an appropriate discourse/theory for feminist politics. Is it desirable, or even possible, to ground a feminist politics minus the idea of a feminine subject - with a specific identity and definable interests? If women are to be seen as a coherent identity, however, are they to be "...assigned an identity and socio-cultural position in terms that make it possible for women

to be conceived as men's equals, or is woman's identity to be conceived in terms entirely different from those associated with and provided by men?" (Grosz, 1990: 336).

It is argued, furthermore, that to discuss emancipation or empowerment, a primary feminist political objective, is to presume subjectivity and this, precisely - the delineation of a definite site, a space and means of feminist politics - is both a necessity and a problem. The necessity refers to the need to argue a specificity to feminism that will resist its absorption by other politics; the problem refers to the fact that the area it designates cannot be theoretically specified in terms of a pre-given category "woman and hence simply and obviously a struggle for women by women alone."³ The dilemma facing feminists is that the foundationalist categories such as "truth", "essence", "human nature", "rationality", or "consciousness" - the very instruments of modern power which have served to exclude and oppress women - are also the tools of criticism that hold the promise and possibilities of emancipation. Hence the reason to suspect an emancipation from modernity, that is grounded in the assumptions of modernity, which will repeat the same politics of exclusion and oppression. Thus the postmodernist logic of the demise of the subject and, with it, the impossibility of fashioning a feminist discourse on emancipation:

...white feminist politics in the West since the 1960s have been deeply rooted in and dependent upon the Enlightenment discourse of rights, individualism and equality, the epistemological legacy that feminists have inherited from these same discourses has only recently been called into question... [of the many] threat[s] that postmodernism poses to the self-understanding of white western intellectuals... [one] is the belief (or hope) that there is some form of innocent knowledge to be had... the discovery of some truth which can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all. Those whose actions are grounded in or informed by such truth will also have their innocence guaranteed. They can only do good,

not harm to others. They act as servants of something higher and outside (or more than) themselves, their own desires and the effects of their particular histories or social locations. (Flax, 1992: 447)

One feminist reply to this position, however, is that the postmodernist "death of the subject has brought about new and necessary challenges... opened up possibilities for generating new forms of subjectivities... feminist anti-humanism, therefore, celebrates the "death of man", endowing the theoretical possibility not for the "birth of Woman" but for the "birth of women" (Zarkov, 1991: 37). Put in another way, feminism - as the struggle for the equality of women - should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of a "...definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category "woman" is constructed in subordination" (Mouffe, 1992: 382). Feminist questioning of the political construction and regulation of the "woman" subject, however, does not amount to a repudiation or negation of subjectivity, much less of agency. In fact, as Judith Butler (1992) argues, to interrogate the pre-given foundationalist premise of subject-construction is the very precondition of agency (Butler, 1992:12). On the other hand, she continues, to assume a pre-given subject as a necessary point of departure for political practice is to ignore the exclusion, differentiation and repression inherent in the political construction and regulation of any subject. It actually "refuses to acknowledge that agency is always and only a political prerogative" (Butler, 1992: 13).

The debates on the possibility, or impossibility, of grounding a feminist politics minus the idea of a feminine subject - with a specific identity and definable interests - is anything but resolved. On the one hand we recognize the political necessity, within feminism, to speak as and for women. In fact, demonstrations, networking, grassroots-organizing, lobbying efforts for effective legislation are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics. This is also true of the Malaysian situation. Campaigns for women's rights need to make claims on behalf of women. Yet, in the process of organizing and

realizing these campaigns when the group "women" is referred to, a debate, if not a dispute, inevitably arises as to the concrete, descriptive, implications of the term. Resistance and factionalization are often attendant features of organizing campaigns (there are, of course, also other reasons for the factionalization). This is so because describing the referent group involves defining out others, as subject-criteria are constituted through exclusion and repression. These practices of excluding/repressing identity differences are not merely textual, semantic or discourse-minus-reality affairs. We can see, for example, in the context of striving for effective legislation how certain criteria need to be met for a woman to be, quite literally, a claimant in sex discrimination, domestic violence or rape cases.

The case of the Malaysian Domestic Violence Act, which was recently passed by Parliament, in May 1994, is an example in point. It becomes quite urgent in such socio-legal frameworks, to ask who qualifies as a "who", and what systematic structures of empowerment make it (im)possible for certain parties to invoke the "I" effectively within a court of law. It may be unsaid but the ontological specificity is nevertheless invoked whenever a specific legal or political-interest representation is made, as is the case here. Who is the "I" invoked? Is it the woman (and which woman) who defines, when and under what conditions she experiences or finds herself abused, violated, harassed, battered, raped? Or is it the society, in the agencies of the policy-makers, legislators, judicial staff and police who is ultimately structurally (dis)empowered by this legislation? If the feminist goal is that a woman (every and any woman) should be the one who defines her own position, what are the political practices and theoretical frameworks upon which that goal can be achieved, bearing in mind the specificity of the aforementioned power relations?

Moreover, the political discourse/convictions underpinning these feminist strategies of women's organizations-in-the-forefront, in Malaysia as well as in other countries, is that the material, physical, bodily and socio-economic features of women's subjugation, oppression and exploitation in this particular community are real and urgent and there is the need to organize and campaign for new and more rights for women as members of this community, within the

given socio-political conditions afforded by this context. A feminist discourse that does not presume and prioritize the materiality of women's bodies and women's sex will not be able to understand the material violence that women suffer nor can it offer an effective feminist practice. Yet, the matter of identities, bodies, or intelligibility of women's bodies, need to be problematized in order to clarify and analyse the forms of violence which are more insidious, more constitutive and more pervasive than that which meets the eye. Consider, again, the legal restrictions in the Domestic Violence Act, that regulates what does and does not count as "domestic violence", the marking off in advance of what will or will not qualify under the signification of "domestic violence", or what are the legal criteria defining "complainant" or "victim". Sexual harrasment, domestic violence or rape are real and clear facts of Malaysian women's lives; they inflict material violence on women's bodies; they need to be understood from women's experiences of these forms of violence and, *a fortiori*, effective prevention, protection and justice for women need to be organized and campaigned for. Yet, for instance, the language of violence against women constitutive of discourses on sexual harrasment, domestic violence or rape - "Women ask for it", "they misunderstand the gestures", "the way they dress entices and invites trouble", etc. - are reflective of the phallogentric technology at work in this society which produces and regulates the social meaning of sexuality and women's bodies. This language actually enforces a violence and rationalizes it after the fact. Again, this "language of violence" takes on a political significance and entail concrete, drastic and violent implications when the "language" is the law, official state policy, official-religion or the authoritative legislation of what will be the materiality of sex, of what legal/political/religious restrictions regulate what does and does not count as rape/sexual harrasment/domestic violence.

When left unchallenged, then, the very terms by which any violation against women is explained, in other words the societal or legal intelligibility of crimes of culpability, are effected through the erasure and negation of other terms not constitutive of the category invoked. Thus, the very terms by which the violation is explained or

described enact the violation, and therefore the violation was under way before it takes the empirical form of a criminal act. There is, then, already in this foreclosure a violence at work which, given the authority of a particular legislation when enacted, amounts to a societal, if not government-facilitated violation.

There is no doubt, of course, of the awareness among Malaysian feminists that the campaigns need to address what are just as real and urgent concerns - to challenge, subvert and displace the phallogocentric technology and mechanisms, inherent in this society, which produces and regulates the intelligibility or meanings assigned to women's bodies. Yet, there is a need to discuss/debate the strategies and implications of this approach. Above all, to realize the necessity of this approach and that to take this approach is not to deny the materiality/identity of bodies or sex but transform the meanings imposed on them and displace them from the contexts in which they are deployed as instruments of oppressive power.

Conclusion

The variety of feminist discourses and women-projects, not least the geo-political range of feminisms, taken together does not amount to a united body of thought or discourse. In fact, as Vicky Randall (1991) demonstrates, it is but "...a small exaggeration to say that feminism is presently facing a crisis of identity, not only as a movement but in terms of its theoretical relationship to women" (Randall, 1991: 515). The importance of women and the need to combat their oppression is a commonality and political objective of all these many "feminisms". It may be safely stated that what still lies at the heart of the projects of women organizing for change, whatever the feminist discourse that informs their actions, is a quest for an identity or subjectivity which is women's not only in the theoretical-representational mode or the symbolic order but in all social relations of production and reproduction.

The contemporary feminist debates being staged in the West regarding the politics of identity/differences does imply a loss of

epistemological certainty and may pose a threat to political activists, feminist or otherwise, who are accustomed to the guarantee of a basic ontological solidarity, among the disenfranchised of society needed for political action. These uncertainties and anxieties, however, cannot invalidate the crucial insights of these debates that, *inter alia*, the categories or intelligibility of "woman" or "gender" or "sexuality" if not interrogated have violently excluded the experiences and situations of "others" erased from those definitions. Perhaps, at the end of the day, it is the politically engaged women-organizing-for-change who have to strategically intervene in the processes whereby the production and reproduction of oppressive power relations create and regulate male and female subjects, gender asymmetries and sexual meanings in specific contexts. To engage in effective yet responsible politics in the Malaysian context, no less complex a situation than any other, is to be grounded within contingent and ambiguous contexts, to recognize and account for, in strategizing campaigns, the differential implications of race/ethnicity, gender, geo-political location and sexual identities, not only in its socially constructed meanings, but in all its violent foreclosures.

Notes

¹ Millman and Kanter (1987), posits six main methodological critiques of which I shall list the most salient:

- i. The use of certain conventional field-defining models, eg. social structure and agency ala Weber or Marx and variations of these but none, for instance, allowing for the analysis of gender relations/dynamics or emotion;
- ii. Not only are the field-defining models but the notions of the fields of social action are inherently restrictive: for example, the "interplay between informal, interpersonal networks and the formal, official social structures", especially "informal, local social structures in which women participate most

frequently" and significantly;

iii. The "single society" concept whence women and men are lumped together, thus not taking into account that they may "inhabit different social worlds" which do make a difference in terms of political culture;

iv. "Sex" is not considered as a variable in dominant social inquiries, thus reflecting a methodology which reproduces the formal/informal organizational principles inherent in the social ontology of the researchers.

² For a survey of the definitions and the development of the idea of "civil society" from the *koinonia politike*, envisioned for the adult, male Grecian, to the modern, property-centered accounts of civil society, see Keane (1988), see also Pateman (1986), for a feminist reading.

³ cfr. Grosz (1990), Zarkov (1991) for bibliography of debates.

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