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AGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST DISCOURSE

Abstract

The idea of agency is a key concept in feminist theory and gender politics. It is also understood as a manifestation of relational autonomy countering systems of exploitation and oppression and subverting patriarchy. Seen in this way, agency aims at resistance from within oppressive situations. How agency has been conceptualised in social theory and feminist theory is the singular objective of the paper. It begins with conceptualising key variables like agency, structure, resistance and their interlinkages. Subsequently, the agency-structure debates so central to both sociological and anthropological enquiries are addressed. The paper then shifts to selective major feminist cross-cultural analytical engagements with gender and agency both at the conceptual and empirical levels. The paper concludes by posing questions the answers to which are still being scripted.

Keywords: *Agency, Structure, Gender, Resistance, Power*

Introduction

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please;
they do not make it under self-selected circumstances,
but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”
The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon (Marx 1852)

“All women actively make choices,
but many of the circumstances under which they act are not of their own
making”
(Walby 1996: 16).

The notion of agency has an important as well as contentious place in the social theory. Broadly understood, the concept of agency is interlinked with the notion of action’s freedom and free will. At a very basic level it means any individual’s ability to act despite odds, free will, autonomy & relative autonomy among others. Thus, when an individual tries to transform the

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overarching structural framework in whatever way, she activates / practices her agency and thus is termed as acting as an agent. It involves the discourse on power and power relations also as there will no need to be in agency mode if there is nothing to be resisted. It emphasizes the power-negotiating capacity of the individual in society howsoever micro in its locale and approach. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity; their *sense* of agency, or 'the power within'. Feminist scholarship, activism, and politics in contemporary times are in the process of unravelling not only the structures of female subordination but are also actively engaged in culling out the micro sites of resistance and subversion of the same. The present paper is an attempt to briefly sketch the broad contours of such emancipatory epistemological engagements which are feminist in nature and thus are liberative in perspective.

Unpacking Agency, Structure and Resistance

“... there is no fact of the matter, no evidence, however tentative or questionable, that will serve adequately to identify actions “chosen” or “determined” for the purposes of sociological theory” (Loyal and Barnes 2001: 507).

The debate centered upon action and structure is a perennial issue yet to be resolved and addressed to its optimum in social theory. Significant insights are sprinkled across the conceptual, definitional and theoretical rugged terrains of social science in general and sociology in particular. The troublesome question posed has two variables within; first, the individual who is capable of enacting his/her agency and thus overrides the strictures of any given social structure; and on the other hand, is the second variable wherein the socio-structural boundaries inhibit the free-flow of the individuals' actions and thus limits them to a 'bounded' and patterned form of existence. In such a scenario, there emerges a kind of dualism between agency and structure wherein both appear to be diametrically in opposition to each other. There seems to be no way out as they keep on clashing in the day-to-day existence in the social world. Over a period, in the sociological analysis has emerged a mid-way out wherein instead of standing in opposition, there is a degree of mutual 'symbiotic' relation (relational) interlinkage between these two. As a result of such a sociological argument, both agency and structure 'impose' each other and thus are "cause and effect" of each other's actions and existence. The emphasis is on how the structure is produced, reproduced and transformed through human agency i.e. a delicate equilibrium between defiance and compliance.

Anthony Giddens outlined his theory of structuration (implying that 'structure' must be regarded as a process, not as a steady/ static/ unchangeable state ... the processual nature of structures ... and structurally reproductive agency) wherein the society is seen as the output of the "social practices across space and time" (1984: 2). Structures are thus to be understood as enabling as well as constraining. According to him:

“Structure: Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledge ability and as instantiated in action” (1984: 377).

His theory of structuration argues that both structure and agents (capable individuals) are product of each other and most importantly, the actor / agent ‘could have done otherwise’. According to him, “The concept of structuration involves that of the *duality of structure*, which relates to the *fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency*. By the duality of structure I mean that the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems” (Giddens 1979: 69 [italics in original]). Thus, neither the structure is static and dominant over the individual; nor the individual can act according to his/her whims and fancies. He notes that “in and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible” (1984: 2). At this juncture it would be pertinent to take note of what he stated about agency; for him “ ‘Action’ or agency, as I use it, thus does not refer to a series of discrete acts combined together, but to a *continuous flow of conduct*. The concept of agency as I advocate it here, involving ‘intervention’ in a potentially malleable object-world, relates directly to the more generalised notion of *Praxis*’ (Giddens 1979: 55-56 [italics in original]). As a result of such a dynamics between ‘agent’ and ‘structure’, a social structure “exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (1984: 17). Thus, structures not only shape people’s practices, but it is also people’s practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures.

Interlinking power, agency and structure, Giddens outlines that “Power”, along with ‘agency’ and ‘structure’, is an elementary concept in social science” (1984: 7). He defined power as “a sub-category of ‘transformative capacity’, to refer to interaction where transformative capacity is *harnessed to actors’ attempts to get others to comply with their wants*” (Giddens 1979: 69 [italics in original]). He further states that “... to be an agent is to have power. Power means ‘transformative capacity’, the capability to intervene in a given set of events so as in some way to alter them” (1984: 7). According to him:

“To be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference’, that is, to exercise some sort of power” (Giddens 1984: 14).

From the above it becomes clear that for Giddens, in the overall framework of structuration, 'knowledgeable' human agents (i.e., people who know what they are doing and how to do it), and agents act by putting into practice their necessarily structured knowledge. Thus, we see that what he is terming as agency can be understood as 'resistance' as individuals are not passive and docile observers of the rules and structures of domination of the society at large. Rather, most of the time, the individuals attempt to transgress and transcend the barbwires and act according to their available 'choices'.

Elaborating on the agency-structure debate, where in the latter the actor is denied any kind of 'agency' as he/she is entrenched in the structural location; Apter and Garnsey observe that "the debate on agency and structure is concerned with the questions: What capacity do individuals have to act independently of structural constraints? From this stems a further question: What are structural constraints when these refer not to material or biological structures but to deeply ingrained patterns of social interaction?" (1994: 20). These queries have been responded in the study with reference to the theories which are of immense importance in the structure-agency debate. Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) talks about strategy and everyday tactic. Strategy, for him is "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'" (ibid: xix) whereas a tactic "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (ibid: xix). Ortner has bracketed the issues pertaining to agency-structure within the modern versions of 'practice theory' which accepts that "society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction" (1984: 159). At another place she has similarly noted that "Within a practice framework, there is an insistence, as in earlier structural-determinist models, that human action is constrained by the given social and cultural order (often condensed in the term 'structure'); but there is also an insistence that human action *makes* 'structure' - reproduces or transforms it, or both" (1996: 2).

It is important to note that agency tends to be operationalized as 'decision-making' in the social science literature and it can take several other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities" (Kabeer 2000: 29). Similarly, Kumar contends that "... protest does not have to take only well-recognised forms but that it can appear in various other permutations of daily life: evasive tactics, counter-culture of language, genres of song and dance, myths full of double entendres, private correspondence and diary writing, and many pressure tactics..." (1994: 3). Additionally, agency is explored in social sciences with a focus on the actor as

a subject and his/her social action having a purpose and context of meaning. According to Ahearn, "Agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (2001: 112). Human agency can be also understood as the "temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970). In similar way, McNay states that agency "yields an understanding of a creative or imaginative substrate to action" (2000: 5).

It needs to be underlined that the notion of agency is intricately bound with power and domination on one hand and resistance on the other. As McNay has flagged that "agency is inseparable from the analysis of power and, therefore, is not so much a thing in itself as a vehicle for thinking through broader issues, such as the nature of freedom and constraint" (2016: 39). Similarly, the notions of coercion, autonomy and choice are also built in the agency-structure dynamics. Madhok et al. have noted that "Those writing within political theory and philosophy, for example, are more likely to engage with notions of autonomy, while those working within social or cultural theory are more likely to talk of agency" (2013: 5). Viewing autonomy as both a status and a capacity concept, Mackenzie talks about feminist conceptions of autonomy which is a gendered reading of self-determination, self-governance and self-authorization (2017: 515-527).

Foucault's writings on 'counter-power' or 'the antimatter of power' crucially points to the scenario that power, agency and resistance are intertwined. According to him, "The term 'power' designates relationships between partners of an ensemble of actions which induce others and follow from one another" (1982: 786) and thus "power makes individuals subjects" (ibid.: 781). He further outlined that "power is not a function of consent. the relationship of power can be the result of a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus" (ibid.: 788). Significantly, the counter to power through various modalities of struggle and resistance exist and operate side by side. For him, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978: 95-96). At another place he argued that "most important is obviously the relationship between power relations and confrontation strategies" (Foucault 1982: 794). Such an argument interestingly coincides with what Ortner has to say that "resistance, even at its most ambiguous, is a reasonably useful category, if only because it highlights the presence and play of power in most forms of relationship and activity" (1995: 175). One can see that Foucault fundamentally changed the view of power, and thus logically, resistance. As Nealon has stated, "In Foucault's work, it's first and foremost a descriptive claim: as power becomes increasingly

more invested in the minute details of our lives, so too our modes of resistance become increasingly subtle and intense” (2008: 108). Similarly, Pickett has stated that in Foucault’s writings it appears that “Resistance is what threatens power; hence it stands against power as an adversary. Although resistance is also a potential resource for power, the elements or materials that power works upon are never rendered fully docile” (2005: 44). Interlinking the writings by Foucault and how these have led to a renewed debate within the feminist discourse on power and resistance, Sawicki contends

Foucault’s analyses of the dimensions of disciplinary powers overlapped with those of feminists already engaged in the project of exploring the micropolitics of ‘private’ life. His analytic of power/knowledge could be used to further feminist explorations into the dynamics of patriarchal power at the most intimate levels of experience..... The history of modern feminist struggles for reproductive freedom might be understood as central to the history of bio-power (1996: 160).

Agency as resistance is another significant analytical category which is central in understanding agency though Ortner is of the firm conviction that many a times, ethnographies have failed to bring out the novelty and multi-textured sites of resistance (Ortner 1995: 173-193). The feminist scholarship on resistance tends to respond to the questions like “Does the act of resistance include a conscious intent on the part of the person resisting, or can any transformative practice be identified as resistance?” (Fruzzetti and Tenhunen (2006: ix). Various acts of resistance can be seen as manifestations of agency though agreeing with Parry that “.... proposals on how resistance is to be theorised display fault-lines within the discussion that rehearses questions about subjectivity, identity, agency and the status of the reverse-discourse as an oppositional practice....” (1994: 172). In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) based on his study of a rice-growing village in northern Malaysia, James Scott makes a powerful argument for identifying “between abject unquestioning deference and violent outrage ... the massive middle ground in which conformity is often a self-conscious strategy and resistance is a carefully hedged affair that avoids all or nothing confrontation” (1985: 285). It is worth mentioning here that Scott’s “everyday forms of peasant resistance” refer to the innocuous acts undertaken by peasants such as foot-dragging, arson, sabotage, slander and feigned ignorance. Such actions often avoid direct confrontation with the authority but nonetheless served to limit and undermine the domination of more powerful groups. Furthermore, he speaks of the ‘public transcript’ i.e. people endorse and embrace their own subordination in ‘public’ on one hand; and, the ‘hidden transcript’ i.e. when the authority is out of the sight, those who are weak will ‘mock and humiliate’ the former. Dirks et. al. have argued that “The general discussion around the trope of resistance is further motivated by a reaction against totalizing formulations about power and domination” (1994: 19). Interlinking power, subordination and resistance, Chandra has conceptualized resistance as “to

minimally apprehend the conditions of one's subordination, to endure or withstand those conditions in everyday life, and to act with sufficient intention and purpose to negotiate power relations from below in order to rework them in a more favourable or emancipatory direction" (2015: 565). More than often, such position on power, agency & resistance is contrasted with omnipotent social structure through which the individual is shaped and constrained. Power "may operate at the level of ideas, persuading the mind of its legitimacy, or it may work as a material force directly coercing the body" (Mitchell 1990: 545).

Agency & Resistance in Feminist Discourse: Key Signposts

Unravelling the human agency and resistance within structures of subordination has been (and still is) the core tenet of feminism, feminist activism and scholarship as noted by Oksala that "Conceptions of power that fail to account for the possibility of some measure of resistance will make it impossible to theorize feminist transformations - transformations of the self as well as political transformations" (2017: 687). According to Mahmood, "A central question explored within this scholarship has been: how do women contribute producing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?" (2001: 205). Similarly, McNay has raised important question regarding women and agency like "how women have acted autonomously in the past despite constricting social sanctions and also how they may act now in the context of processes of gender restructuring" (2000: 5-6). In responding to these issues, we come to two different opposing responses. The first one highlights some limitations at least at the conceptual level whereas the latter appears to be more positive in locating the agency of women both through her macro and micro forms of resistance & subversion of power hierarchy. Regarding the former, concerns have been raised by Isaacs wherein she argues that "Given conditions of oppression presupposed by a feminist understanding of social structures, feminist agency is paradoxical. ... because feminist assumptions about women's socialization seem to entail that women's agency is compromised by sexist oppression" (2002: 129). Sangari further problematizes the link between women and agency stating that "However, women's agency remains problematic in both theory and practice: because women are simultaneously class differentiated and subject to the frequent cross-class expansion of patriarchal ideologies" (1999: 364). Seen in this way, in the context of feminist writings, "The concept of agency has caused and continues to cause great anxiety within feminisms that wish, on the one hand, to register 'women's oppression', yet on the other, to avoid the figure of 'woman as victim'" (Lovell 2003: 14).

It is in this wide & heterogeneous canvass of women positing her agency and resistance to subvert the powerful structure of dominance; the works by Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood need special attention. Lila Abu-Lughod in her work *Veiled sentiments: honor and poetry in a Bedouin society* (1986;

1993) studied women in Awlad 'Ali group of Bedouin community which is a sex-segregated society in Egypt's Western Desert and attempted to explore the nuanced nature of women's agency & resistance in the same. Marking a conceptual shift from the ongoing debates in the women & agency framework, she argued to perceive resistance as "a diagnostic of power" (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 42). During the study, she elaborated various strands of acts of resistance practiced by Bedouin women to overcome traditional structures of power in this community. According to her, the sexually segregated space of the household works to an advantage for the Bedouin women. Herein she is the queen and acts according to her whims and fancies. In her daily routine, she continuously defies the patriarchal strictures. For instance, "They often collude to hide knowledge from men; they cover for each other in minor matter..." (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 43). Second site of resistance is the process of solemnizing marriage proposals and marriage. Though this process is under the absolute control of men, yet due to its intricacy the women of the household also get involved in the same. If at any point of time, they see that her daughter will not be happy in the proposed groom's family, then she tries very hard to block the marriage proposal. Many a times, it works and thus the bonding between the mother and daughter gets further strengthened. Even if they fail in their attempts, they make it a point to publicly ridicule the groom and his family when the marriage is taking place. The third kind of resistance as noted by Abu-Lughod is what she terms as "sexually irreverent discourse" (ibid.: 45). The enactment of this kind of resistance often involves making fun of the maleness and masculinity of the men, particularly the older men. As the practice is, it is the man belonging to the group of elder / older men who gets married to their much younger girl relative; his sexuality in terms of sexual prowess is openly discussed among the women within the household and kinship circle. The fourth modality of resistance is reflected in the poem / songs (*ghinnawas*) wherein the opposite sex though being a relative, is depicted with less regard or concern. Thus, Abu-Lughod outlined the micro-capillary and day-to-day forms of resistance practiced by Bedouin women.

On the other hand, Saba Mahmood's work *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the feminist subject* (2005) locates itself in the problematic terrain of women and Islam as a religion. She outlined a particular notion of human agency in feminist scholarship - 'moral agency' - 'pious' agency - 'political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power' - (Mahmood 2001: 203). She through an ethnographic account of the women's mosque movement (itself a part of a larger piety movement embedded in Islamic Revival) in Cairo, Egypt attempts to explore Muslim women's agency and resistance in a very different way. The movement emerged as a response to "increasing secularization of Egyptian society erosion of a religious sensibility Crucial to the preservation of 'the spirit of Islam'" (Mahmood 2005: 43) primarily under the influence of the 'West'. In addition to it, the aggressive and pervasive writings on the liberal-feminism originating from the 'West' seriously undermined the

women's ability to cope up with the patriarchal strictures. She argued that agency can exist outside the framework of western European liberal framework. Her aim was to "explore those modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic norms" (ibid.: 15). Thus, for her, agency should not be always seen as something which is always opposite to the notion of power, rather it is a discursive notion (some sort of compliant agency) i.e. piety can be a source of agency. For her:

"I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create. This relatively open-ended understanding of agency draws upon poststructuralist theory of subject formation but also departs from it, in that I explore those modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and re-signification of hegemonic norms" (Mahmood 2006: 33-34).

Significantly, her ethnographic study of key women teachers who use textual and other religious resources within the Mosque movement tries to subvert the religion-secularism dichotomy. The goal of such women and their 'students' is to develop piety rather than an abstract notion of equality. In an important way, she underlines the importance of '*sabra*' (patience) as an important aspect of agency. It is through practicing *sabra* that women tend to surpass the domination of patriarchal norms. It is not the open revolt or revolution, through which these women aspires a sense of egalitarian existence, rather it is through the awareness of her position within a wider community that she develops different modalities of agency. Pointing to the significant contribution of Saba Mahmood's work to feminist understanding of agency, Clare states that "Mahmood's framing of agency away from the language of consolidation or subversion of norms allows feminists to talk about agential practices without normatively judging the ends of these practices and without tying the definition of agency to liberal politics" (2009: 53). Most importantly, "Mahmood demonstrated ethnographically that agency does not always equate to resistance" (Wright 2016: 8) and uniqueness of her study lies in the fact that while studying "acts of veiling and the other pietist practices of female participants in the mosque movement in Egypt as a deliberate process of ethical formation oriented not to the refusal of dominant norms but toward the establishment of a meaningful and valued role for themselves within the terms of their culture" (McNay 2016: 47).

One can also engage with the work by Torab studied *Jalaseh* ritual discourse in urban Iran and invoking the notion of piety wherein it is suggested that through their particular constructions of piety, women "construct ideas of faith and intention in ways that sustain and dignify their actions, and also allow a sense of well-being and agency. Through their ritual discussions and performances, the women can alter themselves and their circumstances, as well as those of others, in a positive way in this world and the next" (1996:

248). Similarly, building and further elaborating upon Saba Mahmood's works, Rinaldo in her work on Muslim women activists in Indonesia spoke of Pious critical agency (PCA) which "is the capacity to engage critically publicly with religious texts. It is a type of pious agency in that emphasizes being a religious subject. PCA does not necessarily mean women are directly involved in exegesis of religious texts, though more women are engaging in such activities" (2014: 829). Charrad has located 'gendered' agency in the Middle East at the intersection of Islam and State which is based on critique of Orientalism and colonialism (and thus 'West') (2011: 417-437). Thus, a distinct form of religiosity and religious adherence has been placed along with the similar plane as agency. Sehlikoglu has noted that the feminist Middle Eastern scholarship while dwelling into the Muslim women's agentive capacities has undergone four distinct 'epistemological and ethnographic' stages; First Wave from the late 1960s to the late 1970s; Second Wave from the 1980s till the late 1990s; Third Wave from the 2000s till the 2010s; and Fourth Wave is the 2010s onwards (2017: 73-92).

On a different plane, Kandiyoti in *Bargaining with Patriarchy* has raised significant issues pertaining to gender and agency primarily within the context of relational agency. In her study, she focussed on two ideal-typical models of householding; the less corporate forms prevalent in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa contrasted to more corporate forms found in the Middle East, East and parts of South Asia. For her, patriarchal bargains entail "Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct "rules of the game" and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (Kandiyoti 1988: 274). Thus, according to her, the micro-capillaries of resistance are often built into or have the possibility of easily working within subordinating structures without destabilising and/or undermining them. In her own words, "By so doing, I was both presenting women as rational actors deploying a range of strategies intelligible within their normative universe and pointing to the essentially circumscribed nature of the same strategies..." (Kandiyoti 1998: 139). One can also look into what Rogers has to conclude on the basis of her ethnographic account that "a kind of dialectic operates in peasant society, a delicately balanced opposition of several kinds of power and authority; overt and covert, formal and informal, direct and indirect. For this reason, the claim that one sex group is necessarily in a 'primary' or dominant role and the other in a 'secondary' one is a specious over-simplification" (1975: 727-755).

Enacting Gendered Agency in India: Texts and Contexts

"The task of feminist historiography is to understand the complex ways in which women are, and have been, subjected to systematic subordination within a framework that simultaneously acknowledges new political possibilities for women, drawing on traditions of dissent or resistance while infusing them with new meanings" (Nair 1994: 96).

At the outset, it needs to be underlined that scholarly feminist engagements in Indian context making visible the action-structure dynamics in a way are in sync with questions raised by Fruzzetti and Tenhunen which include “What venue of resistance is available when they challenge the code of conduct expected from them? What are the alternatives to ingrained patriarchal structures? Is women’s search for different sources of empowerment a form of resistance?” (2006: ix). One comes across various studies which have studied and focused on women’s agency in the context of Indian society. Feminist agency in Indian context depends on the positioning of the women in ordered and hierarchical system of both caste & patriarchy. In India, traditionally, the Hindu women have been at the periphery of the discourse. It stems from the scriptures and has the traditional base of legitimacy. However, as Dube has argued that “By ignoring women as social actors who contribute to continuity and change in society, the social sciences has seriously impaired their understanding of the total social reality” (1986: xi). In this context, the concept of *Shakti* testifying the power being centered in female is one such case. In this context, the study by Gold (1994) of a Rajasthani village deserves attention. Through listening & analysing narratives of Parvati (*Shakti*), Hadi Rani and Shobhag Kanvar; she contends that “They unite positive and negative evaluations of female power as creative and destructive. these narratives as manifestations of *shakti* all subvert or deny such conventions of restraint” (Gold, 1994: 42). Taking into account women’s oral traditions and women’s use of language in rural Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, Raheja and Gold have employed the framework of James Scott’s ‘hidden transcripts’ as evident in ‘gendered’ stories, ritual songs, personal narratives, and ordinary conversations in the field (1994). According to them, such ‘hidden transcripts’ are “implicit in women’s speech and song, the often veiled, but sometimes overt and public, words and actions through which women communicate their resistance to dominant North Indian characterizations of ‘women’s nature’ (*triya charitra*) and of kinship relationships” (ibid.: 1-2). Menon’s study of Bhubaneswar, a temple town in Orissa points to a different form of agency enacted by women (2002: 140-157). Jain while exploring women’s agency in the context of family networks in Indian Diaspora pointed out that women’s “discursive capabilities and practical consciousness and the dialectic of control are often reflected in modes of coping with new and many times oppressive social environments” (2006: 2312).

Oldenburg in her study on courtesans (*tawaiif*) in Lucknow has discussed how keeping two different account books showing their income and expenditure can be seen as subtle ways “the courtesans had cultivated to contest male authority in their liaisons with men and add up to a spirited defense of their own rights against colonial politics” (1990: 261). Subsequently, she argues that “their ‘life-style’ is resistance to rather than a perpetuation of patriarchal values” (ibid.: 261). She during her study found that in contrary to the public imagination, majority of the women being courtesans had actually ran off or

escaped with some help from their abusive family to become courtesan. Family poverty as well as abusive family relations was two major reasons for running away from family. In the process of linking her work with James C. Scott's study on everyday forms of peasant resistance, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985); she argues that "The courtesan's *nakhre*, which include blackmail, theft, confidence games, and even feigned heterosexuality...." can be seen as 'hidden texts' of subversion of patriarchal values. Jennett while studying Attukal Pongala, a women's offering to the goddess Bhagavati at Attukal Temple in Kerala, describes these women devotees as 'a million 'Shaktis' rising' as this ritual which is entirely centered around women (2005: 35-55). Interestingly, earlier this ritual was restricted within the women of Dalit communities, however, today the scene has changed and women across religion and communities participate in this. In this ritual, men simply assist the women devotees and play secondary role in the ritual; as she states "Women were doing the offering, and the deputized male priests were helping them in this context" (ibid.: 54).

Hindu women negotiate with the boundaries and scriptures of rules and regulations in various ways (Young, 1994: 100-101; Bacchetta, 2004: 74-75; Bedi 2006: 51-68). In most of the cases, these women at the forefront militantly exhorted their men to save the country from the 'outsiders' and to restore the glorious 'Hindutva' past. Elaborating on the nature of such participation Sangari observes that "female incitement - women calling upon men to act - exists at an intersection between the 'political' and the 'domestic', between gender relations and other power relations, occupies an uneasy boundary between the respective logics of women's consent and resistance while rearticulating their relationships in different ways" (1999: 384-385). Such participation can be also seen in the context of benign patriarchy (Kalpagam 2000: 176; Sangari 1999: 364). The case of *Brahma Kumaris* can be also located in the framework of negotiation & resistance (Babb 1984: 399-416). In a novel way, Toppo and Parashar in their study on the tradition of Jani Shikar among the select Adivasi groups of Chhotagpur region have located 'silence' as a form of resistance by tribal women which is deployed to negotiate with patriarchy (2019; also see Toppo 2018: 16-28). Thus, in an interesting epistemological 'shift', "Agency' thus comes to be conflated with 'resistance', so that feminists have focused on women's agency in resisting patriarchal structures..." (Sax 2010: 89).

Concluding Gender, Power, and Agency: Towards a Problématique

"... the messiness of social reality has always exceeded the explanatory power of our conceptual frameworks and that this is all the more so in the area of gender" (Kandiyoti 1998: 150).

Understanding the existence, nature and dynamics of the social world has always fascinated and intrigued scholars and philosophers alike. Such unending quest led to the emergence of epistemology and its associated issues.

Knowledge and its creation became the foci of the human intellectual enterprise and soon the understanding/s of the social world became the norm of the day. With each 'epoch' and perspective of knowledge creation, the messiness of the social world began to be organised, categorised and classified and studied on the basis of similarities and differences. Feminist scholarship was a late entrant in such a trajectory of knowledge building exercise. Owing to its distinct feminist vantage point i.e. feminist standpoint harping on feminist research methodology & feminist epistemology; it was initially 'unwelcomed' in the broader 'scientific' knowledge framework. The reasons for such epistemic exclusion included too much focus on subjectivity and transformative in focus.

As feminists began to pursue and explore a woman-centered theory of knowledge, it became clear that the oppression of women is not universal and perennial in nature rather it is frequently punctured by the gendered agency and modes of resistance. There appeared to be a distinct mode of inquiry looking into the world of women through the eyes (empathy) of women. In whatever point of time it began and at whichever place it happened, it can be safely assumed as the enactment of agency through gendered lens. The male-centric/androcentric knowledge suffered an epistemological 'crack' and women started to become the foci of knowledge system. However, with the passage of time, the universal and homogenous social category of 'women' suffered another fission on the lines of the 'West' and 'East', Orient/ Occident, Global North/ Global South binary and similar other axes. As a result of this 'epistemic break', subsequent versions of western 'Eurocentric' feminist theory underlined by context specific for Western women's movements ('Universal Woman' and 'Sisterhood is Powerful') have been strongly critiqued by the 'anti-colonial' and 'Islamic feminism.' Can it be argued that the latter set of feminist writings by the Third World feminist scholars are marked by some sort of feminist epistemological agency to counter the hegemony of 'White women' along with countering the essentialised notions of (group) identity? Can the Black Feminism of varied hue and colour be seen as the manifestation of Black women's agency against the centuries of slavery marked by brutal violence and humiliation? Is there a continuity between Black women, agency, and the Black Feminism as so passionately made visible in *Ain't I a Woman?: Black women and feminism* (1981) by bell hooks?

Stretching the argument further, as and when the South Asian feminist writings challenge the 'racial and sexist' oppression and colonial hegemony of the West, can one see gender and transformative and meaningful agency materialising in a different connotation as evident in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses* (1984) and *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (2003)? How far can one keep on going while elaborating upon and further 'fragmenting' the gender, agency and power? These are not simply conceptual constructs in the sociological and Feminism/ Gender/ Women's Studies discourse; rather

these are 'living and breathing' aspects of everyday gendered lives. If one enters the patriarchal caste-based social order of society in India; can the non-Brahmanical gender specific protests against the oppressive Brahmanical social structure be flagged as 'Dalit women's agency' posing serious threat(?) to their exclusion, differentiation and oppression? Can agency have a religious identity per se as evident in the visible and aggressive activism and presence of women belonging to specific religious identity vilifying the presence of the other religious gendered identity? What about ethnicity? Does it submit to the gender and agency debate as being 'objective' devoid of any subjectivity, reflexivity, plurality and diversity? These are very difficult questions which make us uncomfortable at the level of epistemology, theory, pedagogy and practice oriented towards a more humane, inclusive feminist politics, praxis and knowledge. As McNay has noted "It is in these entangled issues of gender inequalities with emergent forms of social vulnerability and empowerment that one of the principal challenges for future feminist theory on agency lies" (2016: 58).

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