

FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY: TRACING WOMEN'S PLACE IN SPACE

Dr. Chandreyi Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography,
B.S.R Govt. Arts College, Alwar (Rajasthan).

Abstract

The central theme of feminism is to highlight on the inequality existing between the sexes in terms of birth, education, economy and politics. It conceives of a non-dualist egalitarian society. Feminism is based on two prominent concepts of gender, that is essentially a social construct based on the social classification of the sexes into masculine and feminine that in turn impacts the social and spatial relations among the sexes; and the concept of patriarchy speaking of the feminine subjugation by the masculine.

Though feminist theory does not adhere to any biological principle, yet it introduces new ideas like sexism to address the gap between the sexes and draws on women's subjective experience to expand its domain. Over time, feminism has witnessed the development of its different strands from liberal to Marxist to radical to postmodern.

The growth of feminist studies in the realm of geography has given rise to the growth of an altogether new sub-discipline of feminist geography that speaks of women's place on space. Though women occupied minimal position in the geographical arena initially, she became more and more visible with time. Feminist geography is primarily based on the presumption that any spatial layout is essentially gendered.

Key Words: Feminism, Gender, Patriarchy, Waves of Feminism, Feminist Geography

Introduction

Before going into a detailed discussion about feminist geography, it is essential to address to certain questions. Statistics available across the globe raises several queries in our mind such as, as to why in certain parts of the world males largely outnumber females; why the prevalence of illiteracy is more in females as compared to males; why the unemployment rate for females belonging to younger age groups tend to be more than males or why the females are often under-represented in government and politics than their male counterparts. In other words, inequalities are evident between the two sexes in terms of birth, education, economy and politics and it is this '*inequality*' that forms the basic essence of feminism.

Feminism essentially attempts to overturn the traditional outlook by connecting personal with the political or production with reproduction. It is based on the following suppositions:

- Gender is a social construct in which women are more oppressed than men.
- Such construct is determined by patriarchy.
- As women will be more and more aware of such constructs, they may eventually conceptualise of a non-sexist, non-dualist egalitarian society.

Hence, gender and patriarchy are the two most prominent concepts that need to be understood in order to understand the concept of feminist geography.

Meaning of Gender and Patriarchy

The word '*gender*' although often used interchangeably with sex, has a totally different connotation from the latter. While sex is natural, gender as mentioned above, is a social construct that may vary with space, time and culture. The social classification of the sexes into masculine and feminine transforms into gender that in turn impacts the spatial and social relations among the sexes. When such relations are studied from within the realms and principles of feminism it gives rise to the sub-discipline of feminist geography.

So far as '*patriarchy*' is concerned (the word derived from the Latin word *pater*), it simply means the rule of the father and may extend to women's productivity and labour power, women's reproductive capacity and sexuality, her mobility, her access to economic resources as well as her presence and role in social, cultural and political institutions.

However, in order to properly understand this sub-discipline of feminist geography, one has to have a deep insight of the feminist theory.

The Concept of Feminism

Feminism is often faced with two misconceptions---- first, that only a woman can be a feminist and second, that the concept is based on extreme hatred for men. Interestingly, feminism does not adhere to any biological principle and hence, even men can be feminists just the way some women may not be. The central theory of the feminist theory is to assert on the inequalities among the sexes.

Feminism is characterized by the following features:

- It is interdisciplinary in nature that transcends across several disciplines.
- Certain terms like *reproduction*, *representation*, *sexual division of labour* are repetitive in it.
- It includes new ideas like sexism in it to address the gaps between the sexes and the resultant discrimination arising out of it.
- It draws upon women's subjective experience to expand its domain.

Waves of Feminism

The ideology of feminism has witnessed several waves (phases) over time that resulted in the development of its different variants.

The view of considering women as a distinct social group dates back to the 18th century. It was the *first wave of feminism* that began with the liberal principles of the individual rights and freedom for women. This wave drew its inspiration from the 17th century British liberalism and the French Revolution. The *liberal feminist* were against all form of subordination of women and the concept of servitude that was otherwise regarded as 'natural.' In 1792, **Mary Wollstonecraft** spoke of the psychological and economic setback faced by women owing to their dependence on men in her '*A Vindication of the Rights of Women.*' Hence, **Harriet Taylor** argued that women should be allowed to work even after marriage because her economic contribution to the family shall not only uplift her status within it but would also augment her freedom of choice. **John Stuart Mill** highlighted on the domestic violence experience by women and the tyrannical behaviour of their husbands.

The *second wave of feminism* that started towards the end of the 1960s in Europe, adopted a rather socialist standpoint and the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the growth of a new variant of feminism that drew its ideas from the Marxist thoughts and thus came to be known as *Marxist feminism*. It sought to link women's oppression and subjugation to class struggle and economic development. Upholding similar ideas as **Karl Marx, Engels** believed that women's oppression is the result of a class-based society arising from the creation of private property and can only be mitigated with the overthrow of capitalism.

Around the same time, a parallel strand of feminism emphasized on patriarchy and not class as the oldest form of subjugation. They came to be known as the *radical feminists* who believed in the unity of theory and practice, the interconnection between the personal and the political and the fundamental nature of women's subordination and oppression. They attempted to bring forth the importance of women's work at home apart from paid employment and demanded for '*remuneration for household work.*'

Finally, by the 1990s, **Jean Francois Lyotard** laid the foundation for *post-modern feminism*. Being critical of the Marxist idea of a homogeneous human society, postmodern feminism upheld the complex and heterogeneous social identities based on its belief that women from different race, class or ethnicity could not be used cross-culturally.

Beginning of Feminist Geography as a Sub-Discipline of Geography

Prior to the 1970s, it was a widely held notion that women were incapable of political thinking or economic decision-making and women's position in any academic discourse was highly obscured. The discipline of geography was no exception to this. The greatest dilemma laid in the fact that whether the methods and theoretical approaches of mainstream research could be applied to feminist studies. The preliminary task of feminist geography was thus, to make women visible in the geographical arena. One of the pioneering works in this respect was '*The Strange Case of the Missing Female Geographer*' by **Wilbur Zelinsky** in 1983.

Soon there were works produced by members of several women study groups and professional geographical associations in Britain, United States and Canada. A series of researches on feminism and geography was presented by *The Women and the Geography Study Group* under the aegis of the **Institute of British Geographers** in 1981. The same

group organised a series of academic discourses on feminism as a part of geographical thought in 1983 and thereafter, published their landmark work '*Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography*' in 1984.

In 1982, **Janice Monk and Susan Hanson** collaborated to produce their celebrated article '*On Not Excluding Half of the Humans in Human Geography*' while **Mazey Lee's** work of 1983 '*Her Space, Her Place*' provides the best introductory works to this then emerging sub-field of geography.

Two important works on feminist geography came to the fore in United States in 1984—a Ph.D thesis devoted entirely to feminist geography written in the department of geography at the University of California in Berkeley and, a special edition of *Antipode* (mouthpiece of the radical geographers) published exclusively focusing on feminist geography.

Drawing inspiration from their British and American counterparts, *The Canadian Women and Geography (CWAG)* was created within the **Canadian Association of Geographers** in 1985.

Eventually, more advanced and sophisticated works were produced in this field like **Dorren Masey and Linda McDowell's** article '*A Woman's Place?*' As the 1990s approached, an exclusive journal on feminist geography entitled '*Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*' was launched in 1994.

Conclusion

The development of feminist geography as a distinct sub-field gained momentum due to three interrelated phenomena—firstly, the presumption that any spatial layout is essentially gendered; secondly, the fact that spatial relations greatly determine gender behaviour and lastly, it was observed that a person's relation with the environment (especially the idea of a safe and unsafe environment) is largely decided by gender.

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